xoStardust
Alone on Cloud 9

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Alone on Cloud 9

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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- Ever After

Prologue

You know that feeling you get when for a moment everything seems right with the world? Where the stars just seem to line up, and things make sense, and it's like nothing can go wrong? And you feel just like you're walking on clouds, so perfectly content and happy and wishing you could just freeze time and live in the same moment forever?

Well, that's how I feel when I read a book.

Not just any book will do. It has to be the perfect book. The perfect love story that makes you breathless with anticipation, makes you clutch your pillow and stifle a sigh because your parents are asleep and it's two in the morning.

Sometimes it's just one line in a book… one verse in a song… one scene in a movie that makes you believe in love all over again.

When I closed my eyes, I wasn't just Arya Simons anymore, I was Elizabeth Bennet, dancing at the Netherfield ball with

Darcy, Cinderella finally getting her Prince Charming, I was walking on cloud 9, a princess in my very own fairy tale who lived happily ever a--

Wait.

What am I saying?

The real truth is, I

to be that girl. I used to believe in all that made up nonsense about love and fate and the perfect guy and living happily ever after… but I know better now.

When you really think about it, all those decisions that change your life come down to one moment, one quivering second where it all hangs in the balance right before the scales tip.

Everyone else at school knew it as the day of 'The Incident', May 13 of tenth grade, a day I'll never forget, a day

made a choice that would change my life irreversibly.

That was the day I stopped believing in love, stopped believing that things would somehow work out in the end and everyone would live as they did in the fairy tales.

All those books and movies just set you up to be disappointed. How often did the popular gorgeous guy really fall for girl who tried to be invisible?

Do best friends really sit there and encourage you to fall for the one who's bound to break your heart?

Can people ever really change?

What was love anyway?

A four letter word that's been used and abused too much to mean anything.

I know now what it means to me,

.

Because the sad truth is, people rarely live up to your expectations, and 'The Incident' is surely proof of that.

That was the day I came crashing back down to reality, the one place I'd worked so hard to get away from. No knight in shining armour could help me now; no Prince would come and sweep me off my feet. It was the midnight hour and my coach was a pumpkin once more.

And I owe it

to Michael Conner...

Alone on Cloud 9 (1)

I'm finally back! And soo excited to be writing again though I feel like I have a reputation to maintain here... Anyway the story switches from past (Grade 10) to present (Grade 12) so be sure to pay attention to the time so you're not confused =)

PS. The picture on the side is Michael Conner

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 1

"Stop drooling Arya," Amanda said impatiently. I didn't have to look at her to know she was rolling her eyes.

"I'm not drooling," I said absentmindedly, my gaze never leaving the centre table.

"You might as well be, honestly could you

more obsessed?" She said with a hint of annoyance.

I reluctantly turned back to face her. "I prefer the term

thank you very much."

She smiled tightly and gave a slight shake of her head, flipping her chestnut brown hair over her shoulder.

"How can you call it love, you hardly even know the guy."

"And you do?" The words fell out before I even had a chance to register them, and I regretted it instantly even before the smirk on her face fully materialized.

"You know I do."

She turned her face away without giving me a chance to answer while I hid my annoyance at her patronizing tone and wondered once again at the history between them.

Sure they'd been friends once, years ago before I knew either of them, but that friendship was over even if I didn't know the details why. They hadn't talked in forever, didn't even make eye contact for a second. She may have known him once, but that didn't mean she knew him now.

And after all, when had

ever fallen in love?

Amanda Royce floated from one boy to the next on an almost weekly basis. For a short time she'd be head over heels in lust, have a messy break-up and find someone new the next day.

In all the time we'd been friends I'd never known her to go even a day without a trophy husband.

Of course, girls like her could afford it.

Boys seemed to love her, gravitated towards her for the very same reason I did; she was unbelievably confident, and confidence masks everything.

It's not like I was jealous, far from it in fact. I'd been asked out before, but I was holding out for romance.

And THAT, I was sure, Amanda knew nothing about.

I turned my attention back to the centre table, back to the boy who made my heart race ten times faster.

He ran a hand through his chocolate brown hair, laughing along with his friends.

I thought dreamily.

I watched him talk to his friends, lost in my own romantic fantasy, when his eyes flickered in my direction.

The effect was immediate.

His words cut off as his lips turned up into a shy smile. I quickly looked away, hiding a smile of my own but it was only seconds before my gaze drifted back once more, just enough to see his table from the corner of my eye.

He was still looking, completely oblivious to the puzzled looks from his friends, and I felt a thrill of excitement at his attention.

Amanda could say all she wanted, but she'd never understand this, the power of a lingering glance in the cafeteria, a secret smile exchanged across the hall…

It was the stuff of dreams, those intangible feelings that no words could ever do justice.

And it

to mean something that a senior like Michael Conner could notice a mere 10th grader like me.

He was the kind of guy every girl would wish for to sweep them off their feet, and I was the one he smiled at.

Could fate scream any louder?

I was knocked out of my daze by a slight shove from Amanda and glanced around to realize that half the cafeteria was already empty.

"That was the bell, oh starry eyed best friend, which means stop fantasizing and get to class," She said with a laugh.

I quickly stood up and whirled around, slamming hard into someone behind me.

"Sorry! I'm sorr…"

I'd recognize those stormy grey eyes anywhere, I'd only fallen into them a million times.

"Don't worry about it."

He flashed me a grin and walked off leaving me too stunned to move.

Michael Conner just spoke to me. "Someone pinch me…"

I rubbed my arm and glared at Amanda, who only shrugged.

"What? You asked."

I rolled my eyes at her and finally remembered how to walk.

"I think you're missing the big picture here Mandy,

just talked to me."

"He said four words darling, that's hardly a conversation, and it was only because you practically jumped on him."

"No I didn't! It was an act of fate."

"Fate huh? If you say so. I'll be sure to tell Mr. Perkins that when I'm late for class again."

She waved her fingers at me and started walking down the hall.

"Don't forget, we have rehearsal after school!" I shouted at her retreating back. She raised a hand to show she'd heard, but we both knew she wouldn't come.

Our acting class was doing

this year and Amanda wasn't too pleased about her small role. Personally I thought the role of Belle suited her perfectly, but Mandy was used to being the star.

Well, I for one was thrilled to be playing the ghost of Christmas past, but I couldn't help but feel like Mandy wasn't as happy for me as she should be.

I shook the thought off and headed towards class, knowing Ms. Fields wouldn't be on time either.

I took a detour past the office, picking up a copy of our school paper

on the way, and flipped right to the 'Penny for your thoughts' section.

It was a whole page filled with messages that students submitted anonymously.

While most of the comments were run of the mill complaints I could always count on a few good ones to get me through the day.

I smiled to myself and kept on walking down the halls. Aside from the usual, there were always a few messages that reminded me I wasn't the only one hopelessly in love. I skimmed over the rest, looking for my favourite writer, my unrequited love soulmate.

My heart went out to him like it always did when I read his submissions. I wondered again who he could be, and in a school as small as this one, it was probably someone I passed in the halls all the time.

I hoped the girl he loved did notice him. I hoped Michael Conner would wake up and realize he needed to talk to me. I hoped for us both, and I knew somehow that it would happen.

Alone on Cloud 9 (2)

The story switches from past (Grade 10) to present (Grade 12) so be sure to pay attention to the time so you're not confused =)

PS. The picture on the side is of Amanda Royce

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 2

He was coming back.

I tapped my pencil against my notebook incessantly, while my eyes stayed glued to the clock.

Never had math gone by so slow.

Mr. Barton droned on in the front, reviewing a lesson we'd started two days ago.

It was like he knew no one would be paying attention today, then again, he probably

know.

Figured I'd be the last to hear. Even the teachers knew before me.

Mr. Barton didn't face the class, so naturally was oblivious to the pointed looks being shot in my direction.

I pulled my cell phone out from my pocket for the fifth time in the last 3 minutes and read the text over again, still not willing to believe it.

Michael Conner was coming back.

It was my own worst nightmare coming true, and it wasn't fair. He wasn't

to come back.

It went against all the unwritten rules about relationships, if you could even call it that. But then, when did life ever play by the rules?

My first thought of course, had been dread.

Because like any rational person, I wasn't all too pleased that the guy who broke my heart would be in my life once more. The guy I'd once been so naively, completely head over heels for.

Which brings us to my second thought. Anticipation.

It was pathetic on so many levels, I knew that, but isn't there always a small part of you that can't forget your first love? And I knew it was irrational to think that way after what he'd done, but that was the thing about Michael Conner.

You couldn't completely hate him and you couldn't completely love him. They went hand in hand, twisted together, and it was impossible to feel one without the other.

Impossible because even after everything he'd done, even after

, there'd been those moments right out of a fairytale, things you dream about happening constantly but never actually happen in real life… except they did.

It was the worst kind of closure. I could never trust him again, never fall for him again, and yet I couldn't completely hate him either.

The best way to deal was to feel nothing at all. He ceased to exist. He was a page in a book of little worth, long forgotten and left on the shelf collecting dust.

Except he was coming back.

There was most definitely nothing in the scripts about that.

He would be in town in just a week when university let out for the summer and I was completely unprepared.

I didn't need this kind of stress, especially not two months before graduation.

Wasn’t it punishment enough that I could no longer even open my favorite books without shutting them immediately in disgust?

He'd made me lose faith in the only comfort I’d ever had, and it was something I'd had to deal with everyday since.

For weeks I couldn't go to my locker without remembering that he'd been right across the hall, I couldn't escape the ghosts that followed me into the drama room, the student's lounge, the library… and I hadn't stepped foot in the cafeteria since the 10th grade.

Hadn't I lost enough?

Hadn't I already paid my price?

No, instead I had to face him again, turn back the page to the ever present

Why would anyone do something so mean, so humiliating and hurtful for no reason at all?

I could accept that I'd been a little naive. That I hadn't seen the signs, that maybe I'd gotten in a little over my head. But nothing, no scenario I could ever imagine could justify what he did.

And while I fully believed I was over him, I had no idea what it would be like to see him again.

Would the shock and anger and devastation crash over me again?

Would I shout obscenities in his face? Run at him with fists swinging? Spill out the question that still bugged me to this day?

Finally the cursed bell rang.

I jumped out of my seat before anyone could react and grabbed by backpack off the floor, not even waiting around long enough to throw my notebook in before rushing out the door.

I knew I couldn't avoid the inevitable question,

As if I would know, he didn't exactly call me up to break the news.

But of course it's

expected of you to keep tabs on the boy who broke your heart.

Ridiculous.

I knew I was being harsh, people probably thought it would be better that I didn't know, but surely they realized I would find out

, no news about Michael Conner would stay secret for long.

I kept my head down as the halls started to fill up, hoping to be inconspicuous and wishing my locker wasn't on the opposite end of school, but I knew it was a lost cause.

People had a sixth sense for these kinds of things.

You know that feeling you get on the first day of school?

And I don't mean the first day at the same school, but the first day at a

school, that transition from elementary to junior high, junior high to senior high. The day when it feels like everything you ever knew about school was thrown out the window and there's suddenly a whole new set of rules to play by.

A day when you're nervous to the point of paranoia, and it seems like everyone is staring at you even though it should be obvious they would rather catch up with their friends than intimidate some new kid.

Now take that and multiply it a few times, and that was today. Because today I didn't have the anonymity of a new student, people really

staring, and it was clear that even two years later, it might as well have been yesterday.

Needless to say,

wasn't a topic of gossip easily forgotten.

It was always the source of some whisper in the hall, some conversation that had been ludicrously thrown out of proportion, but today it seemed to be at an all time high.

You could see it in the eyes of every student who went here, this unexplainable feeling of being part of something so big. It was a thing rarely seen in high school,

.

There hadn't been this much attention over it since the time it happened.

News around here traveled much to fast.

It was only lunch and already everyone seemed to know.

It could be worse I suppose.

That day the halls had rung with silence, people looked between each other full of mistrust and anxiety, hoping it wasn't them, sadistically wishing it was.

Who could know for sure?

This time there was no mystery.

Everyone knew who to look at, who to have hushed conversations about, and who to stare at with pity.

"Arya, I just heard, I can't believe Michael's coming back!"

I slowed down to smile blandly at Krista. She was one of those peppy types, always quick to smile and compliment you for no reason, but it was all in short supply today.

Don't get me wrong, it was sweet of her to care, and I knew the apologetic look on her face was as sincere as everyone else who mirrored the look, but that was the problem.

I'd been hurt no doubt, but I'd been saved that day too, which few people seemed to realize.

If not for Michael who knows how long I would have bumbled through life with the absurd idea that the love in books and movies truly existed.

It was all just a sham.

Something made up to give fools like me something to believe in.

Sometimes I loved being in a small school, loved that you could go to class and know everyone's name even if you never talked to them, but it was times like this when it just plain sucked.

knew.

Michael Conner’s name was as infamous as mine was well known, though really I'd had nothing to do with driving him away.

I hadn’t asked everyone to stick up for me, or to do what they did. Even then it seemed too harsh, though I knew he’d deserved something. He certainly got the message loud and clear, disappearing the second he graduated.

Personally I didn't blame him for running away.

It was the hate-love thing all over again. People simply loved to hate him, which made it even more ludicrous that he would show his face around Mayfield town again.

I walked blindly down the hall, nodding automatically as people came up to say how

they were that he was coming back.

Had the walk to my locker always been this long?

The momentum of the hallway traffic knocked me hard into someone’s shoulder.

I looked back to apologize only to have the words dry up in my throat when I saw it was Wes Pierson. He was scowling at someone over my shoulder, but before I even had the chance to look he'd turned his eyes to me.

"Sorry," I blurted out, wincing mentally at how high pitched my voice sounded.

He half smiled and looked away, focusing on something behind me again and blushing slightly.

Ridiculously I felt a little disappointed, I couldn't even manage to hold his attention long enough to apologize.

Just as I convinced myself to do it he glanced back and smiled slightly.

"Don't be, it's not your fault Evan can't walk straight."

I just nodded, suddenly really wanting to get out of there, and moved past him. He'd opened his mouth, as if he meant to say something more, but I didn't stick around long enough to find out.

Could that have been

more awkward?

It seemed I was doomed to always embarrass myself in front of the guys I liked.

But at least I was saved from liking him too much, though I wish it weren't because of Amanda.

A stab of pain went through me at the thought. She got

How a sweet guy like Wes would fall for her I'll never know, and while I felt bad that his affection was wasted on someone who wouldn't give him a second glance, I was also glad that she would never get the chance to hurt him.

Everyone knew he didn't need that twice.

They always say love is blind, but I never really knew how true that was until two years ago.

Yes, love is blind. It's blind to common sense and faults and all the signs that tell you to quit while you're ahead.

Whatever happened to karma? That's what I want to know. Surely the Micheal's and Paige's of the world were due a good ol' fashion kick in the ass.

If only.

Maybe the karma of this school had already been worn out from

I pushed my way through the crowds, desperate to get to my locker and talk to Grace.

I'll say one thing about that day, and is was that afterward everyone seemed to know my name.

Strange how it happens.

One day you're just

, the next day total strangers are patting your back, giving you sympathetic looks, offering to listen if you want to talk.

What is it about being utterly humiliated that makes you so much more approachable?

But I didn’t mind, because after being proved wrong on so much, it was nice to know there was some hope in people after all.

So many strangers had stuck up for me, had been there for me for days without expecting a thing in return, Grace was one of them.

She was already there, shifting restlessly from one foot to the other, a crease of worry across her forehead that was visible even several lockers away.

That, and the cell phone in her hand told me she had taken the news even harder than I had.

As soon as she saw me her eyes widened and I found myself enveloped in hug that I sorely needed.

"I'm so sorry Ary! I can't believe he's coming back here, that he even has

to show his face around here anymore."

I pulled away and tried to give a reassuring smile for us both.

"Don't worry Grace, whatever happens when he's here, we'll deal with it."

"We will! I swear it! I'll even keep a baseball bat in my locker, if he so much as comes

And just like that I started laughing.

Grace taking a swing at someone with a baseball bat, now

was something I had to see.

Grace, who wouldn't hurt a fly, was willing to take one for the team. Literally.

Unlike me, she had no trouble despising him, despite never having disliked anyone in her life, and I loved her for it.

"Who'd you hear it from anyway?"

She scowled slightly "You know who, the wicked witch of Westover High..."

"...overheard her talking about it this morning.

found out about it by stalking his Facebook page, though how she managed that when he blocked her profile I'll never know."

"Easy, she created a fake account."

Her eyes widened in shock, but I knew it wasn't in surprise, that was

the kind of thing she would do. A moment later I was proved right as Grace erupted into giggles.

"That's just... there aren't even words, who

that?"

I rolled my eyes, I knew all too well that wasn't even the worst of it.

"Honestly, they deserve each other, I don't know why I didn't see it before, at least one person will be happy to see him."

I winced slightly at the bitterness in my voice but Grace was still to busy laughing to notice.

"It's a pity you've given up on boys Ary, this would be so much easier if you had a nice hot boy on your arm to make him think you don't care."

I scoffed "There are so many things wrong with what you just said I don't even know where to start."

"Oh really? Enlighten me then," She said sarcastically.

We started walking aimlessly down the halls, a habit of ours during lunch hour.

"Well for one, I haven't given up on boys, I'm just taking a long, possibly permanent break, which is so not the same thing, second, '

That’s more Amanda's thing, which brings us to point number three, and this is a big one, nice boys? Please, I've heard that one too many times, and I’m quite convinced there aren’t any."

"I'll give you the first two, but there's no need to be such a cynic, nice boys do exist you know, take that cute Wes you're always blushing over, he seems nice."

I could feel myself turn slightly red at the comment even as I started to deny it "I don't blush over him, just the fact that I always do something stupid around him, he probably thinks I'm a total klutz, and besides he's in love with Amanda so he can't be

nice."

A sudden smirk appeared across her face and she swiped up a copy of

just as we walked past the office.

"Oh no."

"Oh yes."

I shook my head at her, instantly weary. I'd stopped reading his entries after 10th grade but Grace never missed out on a chance of reading them out to me, trying to convince me of something I didn't believe in anymore.

It hurt too much hearing about his unrequited confessions of love, that he hadn't given up on his mystery girl even after almost three years. But I knew who she was and in the end he would only get hurt, like everyone did, and I hated that it would happen to him. I hated even more that love

be real, at least for him.

And how could I argue my way out of this one without giving away that I knew who he was?

"Listen to this Arya,

"Tell me that’s not the sweetest thing you've ever heard. It beats any Shakespearean tragedy, and

is real, he's real, not some made up character."

She sighed breathlessly and I was reminded of myself not so long ago doing the exact same thing.

Most of the girls in school were madly in love with him, at least half were convinced he was talking about them, and

guy was sick of being compared to the too-good-to-be-true

.

And while I couldn't deny his words weren't sweet, it was just as hopeless as all the books. He never

anything.

Was he going to wait forever for a sign? What if it never came? What then?

When it came down to it, fate fell short, you had to make your own choices and most of the time you were wrong.

But then again, if he never did anything, he never had anything to lose. He could go on dreaming and never know the truth. He could look back on his first love and she would just be

, not

.

So in the end, maybe he was smart one.

If I'd never put myself out there with Michael, made it so damn obvious and told the wrong people, then I wouldn't have had to deal with any of this.

Life would be so different right now.

Sure, I'd probably still have been sad that he never noticed me, but we both would have moved on and been just fine.

There'd be no

, my story wouldn't precede me, and it wouldn't matter in the slightest that he was coming back.

But I did, and he was, and now I'd have to deal with it.

The bell rang again and we headed off in different directions. If people noticed we never entered the cafeteria, they never said a thing. It was one of those unspoken understandings.

Again I thought of the unfairness of it all, it was one thing to pay for your mistakes, but no one should have to pay twice.

Alone on Cloud 9 (3)

So, while I don’t want to give anything away, I’m just going to say right now, the incident is NOT that Michael cheated on her, it’s a pretty common thing and not nearly big enough to cause the kind of scandal the real thing will be. That’s all I’m saying though.

PS. The picture on the side is Arya Simons

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 3

I glanced up at the clock and continued shoveling food into my mouth, not bothered by the looks Amanda was shooting my way.

I rolled my eyes at her and gestured at the time.

"Rehearsal, we have to

"

She sighed impatiently. "What's the big deal if we're a few minutes late, no one will even notice."

I gave her a skeptical look, which she ignored while picking the lettuce and tomato out of her burger.

"No one will notice? Considering we'll be running through our scenes, I'm pretty sure they

notice."

"What's the big deal anyway? It's just a play, I'll learn my lines the night before and it'll be all good. Besides Arya, there’s a little thing in the acting world calling winging it."

If she'd glanced up once during our conversation I'm sure she would have noticed my jaw nearly hanging to the ground, but as it was it took another few moments of speechlessness before she noticed the silence and looked up.

"Wait a minute, opening night is in one week and you don't know your lines yet? You know we'll be performing this in front of a

Mandy, all our friends and parents?"

She shrugged and I had to restrain myself from hitting her upside the head.

Without another word I stood up from the table, glaring until she finally rolled her eyes and dropped her nearly untouched food.

Another dramatic sigh and she was up. Most of the time I loved Amanda, but when it came to the play she just didn't understand. You'd think being so overdramatic all the time would make her a great actor. Well, you would be wrong.

We started making our way across the cafeteria and I glanced back at the centre table, disappointed again that Michael had been a no show. I didn't have long to wallow

though, because a table in the corner erupted into catcalls and whistles.

Startled, I looked over to see that a group of boys I'd never noticed before was the source of the commotion.

Looking around it was clear, since we were the only two standing, that the cause of it was the two of us.

Amanda immediately stood up taller, stuck out her chest and smiled flirtatiously at the group of boys. I envied her confidence even as my gaze hit the floor, my cheeks already burning at the attention that was obviously meant for her.

Mandy directed our steps slightly closer to the table, and I snuck a peek at her admirers. The way they joked around, making exaggerated motions and play fighting made it obvious it wasn't serious, but Amanda seemed to take it that way.

There were eight in total, all staring in our direction and hollering silly things, except for one.

A cute boy with messy brown hair looked down at the table with a fierce blush, his friends punching him in the shoulder constantly.

.

His friends were clearly trying to embarrass him, which, judging by the redness of his cheeks, was working. I felt a little sorry for him but it was sweet that his friends were trying to get Mandy's attention for him.

If only they knew, she wouldn't look twice at him while the rest of the boys were making a scene.

Just as we walked past, his gaze lifted ever so slightly and our eyes met before he looked past me to Amanda.

And for a second I felt just a little bit jealous, a selfish thing to feel since I was in love with Michael, but I felt it all the same.

In one glance he seemed nice, too nice for her. And even though I knew that was a horrible thing to think about my best friend, it was the truth.

Their playful laughter followed us out into the halls, and I almost wouldn't have believed it if Mandy's beaming face didn't tell me otherwise.

"Well, I guess I know where to look when Jeremy gets boring right?" She grinned with a wink.

I rolled my eyes at her easy dismissal of her boyfriend and started pulling her arm down the hallway, anxious to get to practice since that spectacle had made us late.

Clearly she was still basking in her limelight since I had yet to hear a complaint about what a waste of time the play was.

We made a quick turn into the arts hallways where the drama room was when Amanda squealed quietly under her breath and tugged her arm out of my grasp to cover a smirk.

"

alert Arya," She said in a singsong voice.

My eyes widened and I could already feel a blush coming on.

What was he doing

of all places?

Amanda's pace slowed down, forcing me to as well even though my instincts were telling me to run.

Yeah, right.

"Mikey!"

My head shoot up in surprise and I was mildly horrified that she'd just yelled his name out like a long lost friend--well, I guess in a way they were.

He'd slowed down and stopped a few steps away from us, looking slightly confused at he stared at Mandy with a small frown on his face.

I realized my mouth was still open and shut it quickly hoping he hadn't noticed.

"Amanda, good to see you."

His gaze turned to me and the puzzled frown turned up into a smile. I tried to keep myself from swooning and breath normally.

.

"And… Arya, right?"

Holy crap, Michael Conner knew my name.

Just a few days ago he’d talked to me for the first time, and now this? I don't know how that was possible but I sure wasn't about to complain.

A nudge from Mandy knocked me out of my daze and I nodded, smiling idiotically I'm sure, but I couldn't help myself.

"So what brings you girls down this way?"

"We're heading to the drama room," I manage to say.

Amanda shot me an annoyed look, as if it was the wrong thing to say, but I was proud for having been able to utter anything.

He raised an eyebrow and looked down the hall to where the classroom was, giving me a chance to breathe before he looked back.

"You guys are in the play? That's cool, maybe I'll come watch," He said with a grin in my direction.

My jaw dropped again, but thankfully he was already walking away and didn't see.

"Did that just happen Mandy?"

She giggled and wagged her eyebrows at me, "Hear that Arya, he's coming to watch you perform."

Now my face was definitely red, but I was smiling too hard to care.

It was times like this that I really loved Amanda.

For all the teasing she still went out of her way to get his attention for me.

When we walked into the room, rehearsals were already in full swing.

Shane Thomas, our Scrooge, was Bah-Humbug-ing away while the Ghost of Marley prattled on.

Costumes weren't in use yet, but some of the basic props were already in hand so characters could get used to them.

The back wall was covered in curtains for inside Scrooge's house, but I knew they would open again soon to reveal the quaint village we'd spend hours painting last month.

Most of the set was complete and already in use, with all the characters prepped for set changes during each scene. And with the house lights off and the stage lights dimmed, opening night seemed only a moment away.

I sighed wistfully wishing I could be on stage and watch the play at the same time, but glimpses during rehearsals were all I got to see aside from peeking out from the musty backstage curtains.

Mr. Fitz turned abruptly towards the door where Mandy and I were still standing and shot us both a glare. I smiled apologetically and pulled Amanda backstage with me.

I headed to the left wing for my first entrance while Mandy wandered off, already texting her boredom to anyone who would listen.

"Arya Simons late for drama? I never thought I'd see the day."

I turned with a grin to Charles Blanc, the very epitome of the Ghost of Christmas Present. He had a cheerful half smile on his face and a Santa hat sitting lopsided on his… bright blue hair.

I raised an eyebrow and replied with a smirk, "Charlie Blanc with blue hair? Never thought

see the day."

He smiled sheepishly "It was an accident, I--"

"THE AUDIENCE MARLEY! LOOK AT THE AUDIENCE."

Startled, we both stuck our heads around the curtain, pulling back immediately as a script went flying past our heads, nearly knocking off Charlie's hat.

There was silence on stage for a moment before Marley took up his lines again, with only the slightest stutter in the first words.

I covered my mouth in a fit of sudden giggles and saw Charlie do the same.

"So I see Mr. Fitz is in his usual good mood?"

Charlie grimaced. "You're lucky you didn't have to come in yesterday, scripts weren't the only things being thrown."

It was a good thing I loved this play or I don't know how I would be able to stand Mr. Fitz. I'd never met anyone more infuriating, except maybe Shane.

Everyone knew he snagged the lead only because of some heavy-duty ass kissing.

Not that he wasn't a good actor, he just liked to think he was the

good actor. And as if having a huge ego weren't bad enough, he was always teasingly condescending.

How he survived high school without getting punched once a day was a mystery to me.

Then there was Mandy; everyone knew she only got the part of Belle because of her looks. The irony wasn't lost on me. Amanda was as far from innocent, love struck Belle as you could get.

It was laughable really, and Amanda would never forgive Mr. Fitz for making her play the woman scorned.

As for me, while I loved my role, it was obviously just typecasting. I looked the youngest and had the long, pale blonde flowing hair that never styled right but was perfect for the airy innocence of the Ghost of Christmas Past.

Charlie nudged me and I looked on stage in time to see Shane collapse on the bed; my cue to enter.

I rushed out of the drama room with five minutes to spare and ended up being one of the first to walk into History.

Not being last for once I had my pick of seats and choose one in the back corner farthest away from the door.

Perfect, for once I didn't have to worry about Mr. Andrews noticing my eyes dropping in class.

I crossed my arms and laid my head down, getting a perfect view of the door as students started trickling in.

A tall guy walked in and pushed some hair away from his face and my head snapped up.

It was the boy from the cafeteria.

He grabbed a desk a few rows ahead of me and slumped down in the seat.

I blinked in surprise and at the same time felt a little guilty. This guy had been in my class for the last three months and I'd never even noticed?

In my defense though, I usually sat at the front, after rushing in right as class started, and just never bothered to look behind me.

The bell rang then, and I looked around to realize the rest of the class had filled up, and Mr. Andrews was already at the front pulling out the attendance sheet.

I sat up straighter in my seat listening carefully for all the names being called.

"Markus Abbott?"

A boy with red hair sitting near the front jerked his head up and answered with a graceful "Huh?" Earning a wry look from our teacher.

He continued doing roll call while I craned my head back and forth to see who answered.

"Grace Howards?"

A girl front and centre gave a cheery "Present!"

"Evan Larkin?"

I looked around again but no one answered.

"Evan Lark--"

Just then a boy with coal black hair burst through the door, panting heavily and causing a few giggles throughout the class.

"Nice of you to join us Mr. Larkin."

"It is, isn't it?" He said cheerfully, earning a few more giggles.

Mr. Andrews gave him a pointed look and he ducked his head down to hide a grin before making his way to the back of the classroom.

On his way he bumped fists with my mystery man while his eyes traveled around for an empty seat.

I realized I'd been staring when our eyes met and a playful smirk made its way onto his face.

He strolled over to the empty desk beside me and flopped down with a wink in my direction.

I bushed slightly and turned my attention back to roll call, hoping I hadn't missed it.

"Wes Pierson?"

Mystery man raised his hand halfway in the air before dropping it down again. "Here."

Alone on Cloud 9 (4)

Just a heads up, I've changed some of the teachers names since I realized some of them were repeated in the previous chapters.

PS. The picture on the side is of Paige Summers

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 4

"FOR GOD SAKES DAVID I HEARD YOU THE FIRST TIME."

"WELL MAYBE IF YOU

THE FIRST DAMN TIME I WOULDN'T HAVE TO REPEAT IT LUCY!"

"IF YOU WANT IT DONE SO BADLY DO IT YOURSELF!"

It was no use.

Reading just didn't work anymore. I thought after two years… but I was wrong.

The words I'd read dozens of times before didn't let me drown into their world like they used to. I was stuck here,

stuck in reality. The very worst place to be, and more so now that I had to deal with Michael coming back.

I pulled myself up from the bed, and tiptoed quietly to the door. They hadn't noticed I was home yet and I planned to keep it that way.

My door gently clicked shut, just as from downstairs the telltale slam of the door signalled another end to another useless argument.

I knew the routine by heart.

He was in the room, clicking away on his computer while she was in the living room flipping angrily through the channels. He'd turn in early and she'd go in sometime past midnight and sleep on the opposite side of the bed.

It was the same thing every day, every night, for as long as I can remember. I suppose I was used to it now, or as used to it as anyone can be, but every night was a reminder of the countless I'd spent as a child, alone in my room, waiting for the fight to end so I could turn on my desk light and read. Read about a world where people were happy, where people fell in love and lived happily ever after. Until finally I could tune it out all together, knowing there was something better out there, better than

.

Except it didn't work anymore.

I tossed my worn copy of

back into the closet; it had been a desperate hope anyway.

Distraction. That was what I needed.

I grabbed my keys off the bed and eased the door open again. Even from here I could hear the TV blasting in the living room, like it was some sort of competition.

There was no need to tread quietly, not my loud footsteps or the slam of the front door would get their attention.

I was glad I'd left my car on the driveway since at this point even backing out of the garage would have felt too long. It may have been rust on wheels but it started and stopped and most importantly, it was all mine.

The green letters on the dash flashed 8:03PM and for the first time today I was excited. The place would be filled with the university crowd by now, the stage occupied for at least the next three hours.

It was all the distraction I could want.

A few minutes later I was opening the door to Moonbeams, already starting to relax in the familiar atmosphere. The place was crowded like I expected, with three people on stage playing guitar hero to 'Story of my Life'.

"Arya, I didn't know you had a shift tonight." Charlie yelled from behind the coffee bar.

"I'm not working, just needed to come in."

He gave me a sad smile and I responded with a shrug not wanting to get into it.

This was a fairly usual occurrence and Charlie had a vague idea of what my parents were like the rare times he'd come over to run lines.

"So I just heard Michael's coming back."

I looked at him skeptically. "You

heard? Everyone's known for over a week now."

"One of the tables I was serving was talking about it, so

why everyone's been giving you funny looks lately."

"You are

oblivious Charlie."

He shrugged like it was no big deal, which I suppose for him it wasn't. Aside from acting Charlie didn't get involved in any type of high school drama. He didn't listen to gossip or spread it, didn't pay attention to what was in or out, basically lived in his own little world. He played by his own rules, for which I both envied and admired him.

I was knocked out of my thinking when a tray of drinks was forced into my hands.

"Well if you're here anyway you might as well be useful," He said by way of explanation and pointed towards a table across the room.

I rolled my eyes and headed over, not really minding the extra work, I enjoyed my job and came here so often most people knew me anyway.

Making my way towards the table Charlie had pointed out I recognized the people who sat there and all but turned back around.

Amanda and Paige,

.

I reluctantly went over, depositing their drinks in front of them without making eye contact and almost slipped away unnoticed.

"

"

I turned back around with a tight smile and automatically my eyes went to Amanda. She was pointedly looking down, seemingly engrossed with the graffiti art on the table.

"

"

Paige Summers regarded me curiously for a second, like she didn't remember who I was, before she made a sour face and motioned distastefully towards her glass.

"I believe I ordered a

"

I tried to refrain from rolling my eyes, but it was hard, she couldn’t possible have taken a sip yet to know that.

With another forced smile I let out a breath, I suspected she had an ulterior motive, but I wasn’t going to be baited so easily.

"Sorry, I'll exchange that for you."

"You know, that's fine, I'm suddenly in the mood for something stronger, come on Mandy, lets go to a place that actually

alcohol."

She stood up abruptly and grabbed her purse off the back of the chair. I ignored her comment, if she thought she was too cool for this place that was fine by me, I guessed it was just too hard for her to attract any older guys without beer.

Amanda got up quickly and moved next to Paige without once making eye contact. I moved out of the way to let them pass.

"By the way Arya…" Paige said looking back at me, "Michael says hi."

What the hell was

supposed to mean. He wouldn't say hi to me, in fact, he wasn't

to say hi to me I thought furiously as I made my way back to the counter.

I wanted to scream with frustration, now even more on edge than I'd been all day. I hated Paige,

her. Why couldn't she just be satisfied with pretending I didn't exist?

Had he already talked to her? Had they kept in touch? Was he already

Never mind.

I don't care. "Nope, I do not care."

"Sure you don't."

I glared at Charlie but he didn't even have the decency to pretend to look sorry.

"What? You haven't seen the dirt bag in two years, you wont know if you still care or not until you see him."

"Well, I'd rather you didn't point it out."

He smiled and pulled my untouched coffee towards him.

"Go home Ary, get some sleep, you'll probably need it."

"I can't sleep, how the hell am I supposed to sleep? She did this on purpose; she wanted me to be a mess tomorrow. And besides if I sleep, the night will pass faster, which means he'll be here sooner, and--"

"And what? If you stay up time will stop moving? Ignore Paige, everyone else does."

When I made no sign of moving he pulled me to my feet and started pushing me towards the door.

"Go home and sleep or else I'll tell Stan not to let you work this week."

"You wouldn't."

"Ah, but I would, now go."

Grumbling I went out to my car and reluctantly made my way back home.

***

You could practically feel the tension in the air; it was like the last 30 seconds before the bell rings on the last day of class, or the tense moments before an exam before you get the signal to begin.

Except the feeling lasted all morning.

First period passed and so did second, and then it was lunch.

All the 12th graders could be seen with a slight grimace turning down the corners of their lips, the lower grades were wide eyed and whipped their heads around frantically, like at any second they expected Michael to jump out of a supply closet or to be sitting in the Cafeteria at the centre table like no time had passed.

Please.

He may have been a jerk, but he wasn't stupid.

He wouldn't just show up at the school like that, not unless he had some support, which by the looks of things would be seriously lacking.

It was only a subtle difference and anyone who didn't go here probably wouldn't notice anything out of the ordinary.

Even so, most of my teachers that day were on edge, which didn't help the situation much.

I had a slightly sick feeling in my stomach all day. There almost seemed to be a protective bubble around me, but while I appreciated the space I wished they would just act normal.

After all it had been two years. I wasn't going to have mental breakdown in the middle of the hall.

Probably.

There were a lot more people in the halls than usual, so clearly it hadn't gone unnoticed that we avoided the cafeteria.

It was like they were waiting for something in me to snap, but Grace and I stayed inside as if nothing were different, trying to diffuse the tension with easy smiles and light laughter, and eventually people seemed to loosen up a bit.

By third period things were nearly back to normal, with just the occasional glance in my direction, and I guessed that was the best it would get.

After tossing and turning for hours last night I'd decided the best way to deal with this was to just pretend like

had never happened, like I was completely unfazed that he was back in town.

Suddenly I wished I had continued taking drama, those extra years of acting would have come in handy.

But whatever it took I just had to follow through. Michael Conner no longer existed, I was ready to toss our book of grade 10 memories, both good and bad, into the flames and watch them turn to ash.

He was just a stranger.

In all likelihood he would ignore me too and with any luck everyone at school believe the facade.

I rushed into work with minutes to spare and stood by the door, letting my eyes adjust to the darker lights after the blaring sunlight from outside.

The few students here were already scattered around on various couches, plush chairs and beanbags, reading books or pouring over notes. Soft music was pulsing from the speakers around the room, lending to the relaxed atmosphere of the lounge during the day.

Moonbeams may not have been the most glamorous place in town to hang out, but it was certainly the most popular among the high school and university students, surprising considering there was a no alcohol policy.

I figured kids came here for the same reason I did, to get away.

During the day it was the perfect place to study or just grab a coffee or a nap on one of the couches, and in the evening the stage was always occupied with students singing karaoke, playing guitar hero, or reciting a poem or monologue they wrote themselves.

I headed to the back room and threw my backpack into my locker, grabbing an apron on the way out.

Jesse gave me a relieved look when I took over from her at the coffee bar while she moved to the cash register. Even after working here for three months she was hopeless at distinguishing and mixing the drinks.

Pretty soon my thoughts were drowned out by the steady

of the blender and the smell of ground coffee beans. It was getting slightly more crowded now as some of the high school crowd made their way over, and the music had changed to a more upbeat vibe.

Over at the Virgin Margarita bar Charlie's bitter complaints got more and more frequent that he was supposed to be a server, not behind the counter, and everything felt exactly like it always did.

Without realizing it I had relaxed, falling into the easy pattern of taking orders, and filling cups with freshly brewed

coffee, milk, shots of vanilla and hazelnut syrup and heaps of whip cream.

Unfortunately it was short lived.

I suppose I should have realized it when I could actually hear the lyrics to the song being played.

For just a moment the chatter in the room faltered, people stopped mid laugh and turned to the door.

It took a moment for me to process what was happened, and by the time my gaze turned towards the door the moment had passed and everyone was back to their conversations, back to normal.

Everyone that is, except for me.

And it finally hit me.

All this time it hadn't seemed real, like it was just some cruel joke, or misinformation.

But there he was.

This was the moment I'd pictured a million times over the last two years, and a thousand more in the last two weeks, but I never thought he'd come here.

And I knew this had to be real because even though he'd haunted my dreams and then my nightmares, even when he'd lived here, he'd never come to Moonbeams.

Until now.

This was real, Michael Conner was back.

And he was looking right at me.

Alone on Cloud 9 (5)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

-Saving Juliet

Chapter 5

You know that feeling you get when you like someone? When your hands are shaking and sweaty, and you're constantly fidgeting and can't seem to sit still?

Where you're so nervous you think you're going to hurl any minute but so excited at the same time you feel like at any second you could just float up past the clouds?

Or when you're playing a sport, and everything disappears until its just you and the ball, and you know without a doubt that you're making that shot, scoring that goal, winning that game…

That's how I was feeling all day, only it wasn't over a crush, or the game winning point; today was the big day.

The drama show.

The whole day had gone by in a blur; I'd gotten to skip both my afternoon classes and hadn't left the drama room since. Even after weeks of preparation, everything came down to

the last few hours before a show. Suddenly costumes needed a final hemming, props had gone missing, someone was being a diva, and hair was coming undone, but I loved every second of it.

School went on around us, people were falling asleep in classes, scribbling out notes, or staring at the clock waiting for the bell to ring. Meanwhile we rushed around putting the finishing touches together, lost in our own little world.

Mr. Fitz was pacing back and forth in front of the stage, nearly pulling his hair out because our Tiny Tim had lost his cloak. It was a fair concern since Eric played the part on his knees to give the appearance of looking like a child while the cloak covered his legs from behind.

I pricked myself with the needle I was using and glared at Cynthia to keep still, and after what felt like just five minutes the bell rang signalling the end of the day and the school emptied out while we worked on.

In the corners of the room people ran their lines for the last time, on stage, furniture was being put in place while set pieces that would be rolled on later were set in the backstage wings.

It was always the chaos before a show that got my heart racing, my blood pumping, it was the moments that belonged only to the cast, that no audience member had any idea about.

Soon we were practicing transitions between the scenes, complete with lighting, music and sound effects, and before I knew it, everything had come together.

Costumes were hung offstage, make up was applied, hair was done, and props were actually in the right place.

"Come on Arya, the whole cast is grabbing coffee before the show."

"Be right there Charlie, I just need to grab my jacket."

He nodded and I made my way down the hall to my locker. The school was completely deserted, and for some reason there was something I loved about being here after hours. It was like a whole different place without the students.

I started twisting the dial on my lock and heard a sigh beside me as Mandy leaned on the locker next to mine, already wearing her coat.

"You have no idea how much I need this coffee."

I grinned at her and shrugged my coat on before grabbing my wallet and tucking it into the pocket.

"It

been a long day."

"You know, I'm actually getting excited, and kind of nervous." I looked at her in surprise as we walked towards the doors.

"And what brought about this change? What happened to winging it?"

She fought to hold back a smile and I knew it was something she'd been bursting to tell me all day.

"When I told my mom I was staying late for the drama show she was so shocked. Of course she hadn't known I was in it, but then get this, she actually called work and cancelled her

meeting so she could come. Can you believe it?" Her face took on a giddy expression, a rare thing for Amanda.

"Mandy that’s so great!" Her mom hadn't been around much since her dad passed away when she was young, and I knew it meant a lot to her that she was coming.

She smiled sheepishly at me. "I know I haven't seemed really into this thing, but I guess I'm glad you talked me into it."

We made it down to the doors where everyone else was waiting and I had to admit we made quite a spectacle. Most of us were wearing a mix of costume and normal clothes, with hair styled for the show and make-up layered on.

The cold winter air was a relief after the stifling heat of the drama room as we forged a path through the snow across the field, all linking hands to try and keep balanced.

Personally, I just thought it was an excuse for whoever fell to bring everyone else down with them.

The little cafe across from school was mostly empty when we walked in, and the bell above the door rung loudly throughout, catching the attention of the few customers there, who looked curiously at our large and oddly dressed troupe.

Like the well oiled machine our group had become, half the cast went up to place orders and carry back drinks while the rest moved several empty tables together and gathered up extra chairs from around the room.

Within minutes coats were slung over the chairs and everyone was hunched over steaming cups of much needed caffeine.

Charlie stood up with his mug in hand and turned to look around at us all. "I'd like to make a toast to us all for a great semester, everyone's put in a ton of hours to make this happen, and we are going to rock the house!"

Laughter broke out and mugs clacked together while hands slapped the table in agreement.

Shane stood up next and the laughing died out to a weary silence.

"At first I was sure this cast was made up of mediocre actors, but to my surprise you've all shown great improvement, and as Charles said, we're certain to err,

the house."

There was shocked silence for a moment, after all it was the closest to a compliment we'd ever heard from Shane.

And then the cheering broke out, louder than before as random toasts were thrown out and the laughter grew, receiving annoyed looks from the older customers.

"Cheers man!"

"Huzzah!"

"To drama!"

"You mean

"

"To coffee."

"To winter break!"

"To getting out of class!"

"Cheers!"

"6:00 mates, time to get back to school."

There was a collective 'aww' around the table, but we eventually got up and headed back. Just in the half an hour we'd been gone it was already dark out and the show started in just half an hour more.

There were a few more minutes of bustling while everyone finished putting on their costumes and looked over their scripts for the last time before we gathered on stage for breathing exercises and to receive some last minute notes.

The usual.

And finally,

it was time to open the doors.

We'd all taken our opening positions; house lights were turned off in favor of dim golden stage lights that left the room in semi darkness. Music filtered through the speakers while guests entered and slowly began filling the seats.

I could just see the doors from where I was and kept an eye on everyone coming in, looking for people I recognized.

Friends, parents, teachers, classmates and, unbelievably, Michael Conner.

It seemed to good to be true, like a trick of the light or a coffee induced haze, but there he was, standing just past the doors with a few friends.

I was relieved when they wandered up the stairs towards the seats in the back. I'd be nervous enough without having to see him directly.

Amanda's mom walked in soon after and took a seat near the front, and then to my surprise, Wes Pierson walked in.

I was excited to see him since it hadn't occurred to me that he would come, but unlike with Michael, his being here didn't make me nervous. I suppose because I was in love with Michael.

I assumed he'd come to see Amanda, so when a cute girl walked up to him and laced their hands together I was a little shocked, and maybe just a bit disappointed.

Ridiculous I know, but I guess it was good he wasn't waiting around for Mandy. Or at least, that’s what I told myself.

Soon the seats were filled and the doors were closed. I took a step deeper into the wings, clearing the entrance to the stage.

The lights dimmed and the music faded until the room was pitch black and the audience hushed into silence.

I felt a few people brush past me as they made their way on stage in the dark.

New music came over the speakers, slowly getting louder as the lights came on again to show the opening scene, and as the first lines were said, the show began.

Two rows of dancers beat their feet against the floor in unison while couples twirled between the lines. A fiddler weaved across the stage mimicking the motions of playing while the sound system provided the music.

Young Scrooge and Belle took centre stage with a swing and a twirl while the rest of the dancers formed a circle around them, dancing suddenly faster as the tempo of the music increased.

From out of pockets the dancers pulled out grey scarves and twirled even faster while around them set pieces shifted off and on. The stage lighting changed to a pale blue wash that faded out for a moment before lighting up again to a new scene.

***

Applause could be heard before the lights even finished fading out, and grew in sound as the first characters took the stage for their bows. By the time I made my entrance with the other two ghosts most of the audience was standing.

I searched for familiar faces one again as the audience poured out of the stands to swarm the stage. It was a mess of pushing bodies and I was grateful when someone grabbed my arm to tug me out of the crowd…

…which turned into surprise when I saw the hand belonged to Michael Conner.

He smiled at me and nodded back at the masses on stage, "Looked like you could use a hand."

I'll admit, I'd spend the last two acts thinking up ways to accidentally-on-purpose have an excuse to talk to him, but none of them had been this easy.

Unfortunately I hadn't thought far enough ahead to figure out what to say.

"I, umm, uhh, thanks."

"So… how'd you like the show?"

He had an intense gaze, like, I-know-exactly-what-you're-thinking-right-now intense. Which would most definitely be embarrassing.

On the plus side, at least I could blame my red face on being overheated.

"It was pretty sweet, I've never been to anything like this before. You rocked it."

"Yo' Mikester, let's roll man, what's taking so long?" A guy I didn't recognize from school yelled.

Michael turned back to me with an apologetic grin. "Sorry 'bout that, Brad's dying to get to this party…"

I tried to nod and shrug at the same time, another classy move.

"Oh, I almost forgot, I got you this."

From an inside jacket pocket he pulled out a single yellow and pink striped carnation.

I tried to mumble a thank you, but I think it came out more like ‘thmnkyou’ as he pushed the flower into my numb fingers, a faint smile on his face as he turned away.

I pinched myself and winced slightly, but I had to be sure this wasn't a dream, because this kind of thing only ever happened in my imagination, my own private cloud 9.

My fingers ran over the velvety petals. No dream could feel like this, it was one hundred percent real.

I don't know how long I would have stood there in a daze if it hadn't been for the second tug on my arm pulling me back towards the stage.

It was Mandy this time, and she was smiling widely as she clutched a bouquet of six red roses to her chest. Her mom greeted me enthusiastically, and handed me a rose as well.

I was only half listening to her mother sing our praises, and I knew Amanda was ecstatic but my eyes were too busy roaming the crowd again to pay much attention.

I didn't realize who I was looking for until my gaze landed on Wes.

He was coming towards us, or rather, being dragged along by the girl on his arm, and I had to grudgingly admit she was really quite pretty.

Somehow I would have felt better if she wasn't.

Realizing I was staring, I turned back towards Ms. Royce and nodded along as if I'd been following the conversation.

"Hey there, Amanda right? You were really good!" Mystery girl smiled widely at Mandy before turning to me without waiting for a response.

"And you are?"

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that she knew Amanda's name and not mine, Mandy was just someone that everyone seemed to know about, I got that. But you'd think people

remember her best friend right?

"Arya."

Mystery girl and I both snapped our eyes towards Wes.

His face turned slightly red under our gaze and he mumbled, "We have class together," as an explanation before looking away.

Mystery girl rolled her eyes and gave us an indulgent smile. "Don't mind my boyfriend, he's not good with social situations."

Well, that's rude, he was

, and was now blushing even harder. For some reason, hearing her use the term boyfriend bothered me, which was silly since it was obvious they were together, but what happened to liking Amanda? He sure got over that fast.

"Why don't you bring the car around Wes?”

Not needing to be told twice he nearly ran out of the room.

I refrained from watching him leave.

"Well, it was

meeting you girls, we should definitely do coffee after winter break!"

Mystery girl turned to walk away when Amanda called out to her.

"Wait, we didn't get your name”, she pointed out.

Mystery girl turned back and giggled, "How silly of me, its Paige, Paige Summers."

Alone on Cloud 9 (6)

Sorry it's been such a long wait, as usual, on the bright side it is long...

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

- Dear John

Chapter 6

I'd imagined this moment a hundred times.

I could picture each one like a movie in my head, down to the very last detail, but not at work, not at the one place I considered to be my

.

I could never have foreseen the way the reassuring and intoxicating smell of coffee could turn sour and cloying, of the way the music from the sound system was suddenly much to loud, and the lights too bright, all drowning me, and I never, ever, expected to run.

But then, that's what I did back then too.

To my credit, I didn't just drop everything and run. I calmly put down the bottle of hazelnut syrup, took slow casual

steps to the back room, untied my apron and placed it on the hook and gently closed the back door on my way out.

Then I ran.

In books, this was the part where the heroine runs for miles, letting her problems drop out behind her to tumble down on the sidewalk as she ran, feeling free as the wind, rejuvenated and light until she reached a beautiful hidden grove or scenic view with a glowing flushed face and only slightly out of breath.

In the real world, I made it three blocks before nearly passing out from the exertion in an empty parking lot outside a shop for lease.

Life was so unfair.

And then it caught up to me, everything I'd gone through that day in a blinding rush, and for a second I couldn't even breathe.

It wasn't even that I felt the way I did back then, if was just the sudden overwhelming memory, everything slamming back in sharp focus.

It was like when you're going down a street you've always known, past the same houses and cars that have always been there, a route you could follow with your eyes closed when suddenly you make a turn, one that you've made a million times before, but now you don't recognize a thing.

And the feeling that washes over you, panic, fear, and worry, and just a little bit of denial until you realize in one terrifying second, lost.

You're lost.

And after that everything seems out of place, and you realized that house with the bushes was the wrong color, and her neighbor didn't keep their car on the driveway.

Seeing him was like looking at an optical illusion, like the impossible triangle. You could trace the lines until your eyes watered and your head ached and it would still baffle you until you just had to accept that you could never understand him.

I mean it.

I put my hands over my ears in the hopes that the words would be drown out, but they were all around me, echoing down the streets, and I wondered how people across the road went on oblivious when it was all I could hear.

I started walking again, but the deserted back road held no distraction and in my mind all I could see were his dark grey eyes, cruel and uninterested flashing around every corner.

In movies this was the part where the sky would open up into a torrential rain to wipe the heroines tears away, as if the heavens themselves could feel her pain and needed to wash it away.

In reality, there wasn't a cloud in sight.

Not that I was crying, or particularly wanted to be soaked, but the perfect day almost seemed to mock me.

The sun was only just starting to sink behind the buildings lending a reddish gold haze over the town and I'll admit I would have been grateful for just one ugly black cloud to mar the horizon.

Instead I took my frustrations out on a nearby rock, kicking it and feeling oddly satisfied with the

it made hitting the pavement.

I had to go back.

There was no other option, no way I could let him win this, small victory though it may be, but still my legs refused to carry me back the way I'd come.

Instead, I looked around me for a distraction, any excuse to stay away a little longer, and my eyes fell on a diner across the street.

It seemed oddly cozy with its flickering blue lights spelling out

, and the glowing red open sign was the most inviting thing I'd seen all day.

As I got closer, the place looked in desperate need of repair but even from outside you could see colorful wallpaper stretched around the room and posters of inspirational quotes were hung up everywhere bringing a smile to my face.

I pushed my way inside to be enveloped in warmth and the smell of greasy food and it was absolute bliss. A middle-aged woman smiled at me from behind the counter and I tentatively walked up and took a seat on one of the stools across from her.

"Now, what's a pretty thing like you doing in my diner on a Friday night?"

Again, I couldn't help but smile; there was just something about moms that was so reassuring.

Other people’s moms, that is.

They always seemed to look out for everyone and know exactly the right thing to say, and since I'd had no relationship with my own mother I felt compelled to tell the truth, or at least part of it, to this woman.

"Hiding"

She grinned widely at me and winked "Well you picked the right place dear, no young man will find you here"

I wasn't surprised she knew it was boy trouble, girls just knew these things, and without having to ask she was already placing a steaming cup of hot chocolate in front of me, throwing in a large handful of marshmallows that made some splatter onto the counter.

I reached into my pocket to pull out some change when she waved her hand at me.

"Don't even think about paying dear"

"But--"

"Ma? Did you need help with anything?" A boy's voice yelled.

"I told you to go home hours ago, don't you have better things to do on a Friday night? Just like this young lass here, in my day kids got up to all sorts of debauchery on a Friday night and I can't get my own son to leave me alone for a minute"

I looked up from my hot chocolate, realizing the last bit of her speech had been directed towards me.

I was about to reply when the boy's voice rang out again, this time closer "It's not safe for you here alone when it gets dark out ma"

"Now, who's going to take advantage of me, old Mr. Miller?" She scoffed with a jerk of her head towards the only other patron in the diner, an elderly man with the paper who'd looked up at the sound of his name.

"What's that? Have you seen what they call fashion these days Melanie?" He said, holding up the paper for emphasis. "In my day, we wore our pants up around our armpits. Monstrous wedgies, but we looked snappy," He said with conviction.

I had to turn my head away to fight back a laugh.

"Maybe

should head home, I can take over here" Now that he was in the room I recognized the voice immediately and looked up.

"Wes?"

His surprised green eyes turned towards me and like that his face turned a deep red.

Could the boy be any more adorable?

"Hey Arya" He mumbled, running a hand through his hair.

His mother on the other hand, looked ecstatic. "You two know each other! How wonderful, you can cheer her right up!"

Now it was my turn to blush, Wes Pierson was the

person I needed to talk to about Michael.

"

"

"Its fine"

I jumped up hastily "I should probably head back anyway, can't hide forever!" My voice was far too cheery and I hoped it wasn't obvious.

"Don't you want to finish that?" Wes asked me, nodding at my almost untouched hot chocolate.

I tried to think of a polite way to say 'I'm getting the hell out of here' but the only thing coming to mind was

and I couldn’t very well say that.

I was about to risk whatever response came out on autopilot when Ms. Pierson suddenly slapped her hand down on the table.

"You know dear, I think I

head home, these old bones don't work like they used to" And with that she winked at me and was gone.

I blinked my eyes in surprise, wondering what exactly had just happened but lowered myself back down on the stool anyway.

"So I take it you're hiding from Michael?"

I winced internally. This was really,

not a conversation I wanted to have with Wes.

Leave it to boys to always say the one thing you're trying to avoid. Girls would never be so tactless.

Casting about for a way to change the subject I made the mistake of looking up.

Any idea’s I’d had were gone now; he was even cuter up close.

He was leaning against the counter across from me, and for the brief moment our gazes locked. I expected more of the usual, pity or sympathy or curiosity, but instead he looked amused.

As I watched his lips turned up into a half smirk.

No way.

He was actually teasing me about it.

And with the relief and surprise of it, the words slipped out.

"He showed up where I work"

"You're right, that's highly suspicious, it's only the most popular hang out spot in town"

I flushed slightly in embarrassment, of course

it seemed so ridiculous to have run away.

"Well then how come I've never seen you there?"

"And miss out on the riveting company of Mr. Miller? No way"

"What's that? You've got acne? Kids today think the world revolves around them. In my day, the sun revolved around the world"

"Well there you have it. In his day the sun revolved around the world" He said matter-of-factly. “Where else would I get such worldly knowledge?”

Make that cute

funny.

"It's nice of you to help your mom out around here, she seems really nice"

His face lit up at that, "She's the best, and I'm all she's got so she'd do anything for me, this is the least I can do"

"What about your father?"

"They're divorced,” He said casually.

I tried not to look too surprised, because that would mean admitting I'd known the guy for three years and never had any idea his parents were divorced.

"Oh… sorry to hear that"

I hoped it wasn't obvious that I didn't mean it, truth was, with my family divorce would be nothing but a blessing. Horrible thinking I know, but I thought it just the same.

"Don't be, I'm not. They're both great parents, just not together."

"Must be nice,” I murmured quietly.

Before he could say anything I decided to change the subject. "So how long have you guys' owned this place?"

"When we moved here, the summer before high school. It's not the best place, but it pays the bills." He said, looking slightly embarrassed.

"That's another reason I prefer the diner over hanging with my friends, it's a quiet place to work, and a scholarship is probably the only way I'm going to college. My mom's got money saved up, but there is no way I'm letting her pay."

"That's pretty noble of you. I'm hoping for a scholarship too, it's my best chance at a one way ticket out of here."

He opened his mouth to reply when we heard a clatter from the other end of the room.

Mr. Miller had knocked over a chair getting up from the table and we both stared for a moment as he mumbled that ‘chairs in his day were built to handle a little pressure’ before Wes ran over to help him.

"Sorry, I've got to help him get home, it's just the street behind this place" He called back to me, walking Mr. Miller towards the door.

"It's fine, I should probably be getting back anyway, can't hide forever" Our eyes met again from across the room and I tried to smile convincingly.

"Wait for me. I'll lock up and walk you."

"You don't have to do that,” I mumbled, blushing slightly.

"It's dark out, no way I'm letting you go alone" He said firmly, leaving no room for argument.

I shrugged as he walked out the door with Mr. Miller. It's not like I couldn't use the extra moral support. And it might not hurt to walk in with a cute guy either.

Minutes later he was back, turning off lights and locking the cash register and safe, not once making eye contact.

As soon as we stepped outside I was glad for the company. The streetlights on this back road were few and far between, and without the neon glow of the diner's sign I could only make out the outline of my hand in front of me.

We walked back towards Moonbeams in silence, all the easy conversation from the diner suddenly turned awkward, made more so by the fact that he was walking much closer to me than necessary.

Not that I was complaining, but I couldn't possibly be trusted to come up with anything remotely intelligible under the circumstances.

Luckily, or unluckily depending on how you look at it, we didn’t have far to go and soon enough I was pushing my way through the back door.

"What's this? An intruder in our midst?" Charlie exclaimed the moment we walked back into the main room.

I rolled my eyes. "Leave him alone."

"Well, if he's back here, he's working, we're behind since

ran away" He said, throwing an apron at Wes and pointing towards the coffee machines. "Those need refilling."

"Charlie!"

"It's fine, I don't mind,” He said laughing "But you

owe me a coffee for this."

I nodded gratefully at him and turned my eyes back to Charlie. "Is he still here?"

The grimace was answer enough, and I felt my stomach sink just slightly before it plummeted with his next words. "He's been waiting for you actually."

I didn't even want to think about what those words meant. No doubt he was just messing with me, no

Michael would be waiting for me.

I walked stiffly back to my station, staring blankly at the order list in front of me. For some reason it seemed to be written in gibberish.

"Everything alright?" Wes asked from behind me. I glanced at him briefly, but there was no teasing look in his eyes now, just uneasiness.

"Not for long"

He seemed to know better than to ask further and went back to cleaning out the coffee filters.

I took a deep breath to clear my head and, with slightly shaking fingers, placed a medium sized cup under the espresso machine. The

it made starting up suddenly brought me back to reality.

I couldn't let him get to me. Not after I'd worked so hard to leave all those memories behind. They were dust on the

road, ashes in the fire, crumpled up pages in the farthest corner of my mind. They meant

.

And most importantly this place was

He might intimidate me everywhere else, but I couldn't let it happen here. This was my home, these were my friends, that was my stage, and he couldn't have it.

Of course, just as I was starting to convince myself I happened to look up and found myself staring at the side of his face.

In a whole room of people he was the one that was directly in my line of sight.

I'll admit, seeing him across the room made my resolve crumble just a bit.

He looked just the same as he did back then.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised, but for some reason I'd just expected him to look different. It was hard reconciling those same features I'd fallen in love with to the image I kept in my head.

And I won't lie, it would have been immensely satisfying if he'd suddenly grown a unibrow or gained 10 pounds. Make that 30 pounds.

Seeming him now it was hard to remember those eyes looking so cruel, those lips twisted up in nothing resembling a smile.

And that shirt…

I recognized that shirt.

That teal green blue oxford that turned his eyes to liquid silver… the one

given him.

There should be laws against that.

And it probably wasn't a good thing that I still noticed everything about him.

As if feeling my gaze on him he looked over and met my eyes, but only for a second before I let my eyes slide over him, refusing to let them linger as my hands automatically filled out the orders in front of me.

I looked back down at the counter, filling a tray with orders and passing it on to Charlie, not missing that he had stood up from his table and was still looking this way.

He started walking over, smiling easily, full of confidence, like nothing had ever happened between us.

Of course he was confident,

. Despite everything that had happened that day, I was the one person he had no reason to be intimidated by.

Two years ago he'd held all the strings, I was just the marionette, and he'd

that, right from the start.

Of course he wasn't intimidated.

I focused my eyes on the espresso machine, pretending to be fascinated by the stream of liquid pouring out of it,

pretending to be completely unaware that he was standing right in front of me.

No way I was letting him pull the strings this time. No way I was acknowledging him first.

"Arya."

I pretended not to hear him. I needed the moment to re-compose myself.

His voice was just like I remembered.

. I hadn't expected that to throw me off too.

"Arya" He said again, a little louder.

The espresso had stopped pouring. No choice.

I looked up, feigning surprise.

He cracked a smile. "Arya Simons, it's been far too long."

I barely keep my jaw from dropping.

"Not nearly long enough Michael" My voice came out steadier than I'd expected, completely calm.

.

"High school's been good to you."

"Well it couldn't very well have gotten worse."

He chuckled softly, half smiling as if I were being somewhat amusing, or like we were sharing an inside joke.

Hardly.

I should have known he'd never take me seriously.

"Did you want to order something?" I asked with forced politeness, gesturing to a menu on the counter.

"Now Ary, we both know I only came over here for you."

I couldn’t quite stop my jaw dropping this time and tried to pass it off as a yawn.

The corners of his eyes crinkled, a slow gradual smile forming like he didn't want to rush, and that's when I knew.

This was all just part of the game. The one he'd started years ago.

Round two.

Of course, it all made sense now. The only way he could get redemption in this place was turning the tables.

He was hoping for a scene, a big dramatic confrontation that would leave him looking sparkly clean and innocent.

.

It was a good plan, brilliant actually, but of course I'd expect nothing less.

"Actually Michael, we both know you came here for something else, what it is I've yet to figure out, but if it's not coffee I can't help you" I said with a pleasant smile.

He raised an eyebrow, confidence not the least bit shaken. "Well, my girl's grown up and gotten some attitude to boot."

My fists clenched under the counter.

He was so damn full of himself. I wanted so badly to wipe that self-satisfied smile off his face.

I was thinking of a suitably cutting retort, anything to reply to that, when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Hey Arya, can you help me with this machine? Something's stuck."

Immediately I felt less tense.

I welcomed the distraction and, with a tight smile towards Michael, turned back to help Wes.

He was standing by one of the coffee machines, a fresh bag of vanilla beans in one hand. I leaned over to look at the machine.

"Looks fine to me," I mumbled.

"I know."

I turned my head to the side to see him grinning and just like that I couldn't stop smiling either.

It was nice to know I had an ally.

"Hey, coffee boy!"

His look turned skeptical. "Is he really referring to me as 'coffee boy'?"

I stifled a laugh while he strode up to the counter, winking back at me before turning to Michael, who to my utter amusement, actually looked annoyed.

No wonder I liked Wes.

"Skinny vanilla latte, extra shot, extra hot."

I started up the machine for his drink and heard Wes come up behind me, sarcasm heavy in his voice when he spoke, more than loud enough for Michael to hear. "He's charming, I definitely get what you saw in him."

I elbowed him lightly in the stomach while laughing and grabbed the drink from the machine.

Michael still had a sour look on his face and I tried not to smirk. Looks like Gracie had been right, having a cute boy around

helps.

Unfortunately, the look didn't last long now that I was back and he leveled me with another winning smile.

"Listen Ary, I know we've got some bad history between us, but it’s been two years and I just wanted to let you know I forgive you, no hard feelings."

Wait a minute.

Back up here.

Was I

this right?

forgives

Could the jerk

anymore twisted?

I refrained from throwing the cup of coffee in his face. Hell, I'm sure that's what he wanted, it's what

wanted, but this was all just part of the game. I had to play it right. Whatever confrontation I was dying to have it wouldn't be here.

Not here.

He wouldn't provoke me into being the psycho ex-something. Hell no.

"Good to know,” I said stiffly.

I forced myself to smile and calmly handed him the cup, imagining only in my head the sweet satisfaction of him clutching his face in pain as the searing liquid dripped down to stain that perfect teal shirt.

Alone on Cloud 9 (7)

Hey guys, I've decided to enter this story into the Watty Awards, so please vote, and also you can now find me on Facebook, look for Celia Rhodes, or join the group xoStardust

PS. The picture on the side is of Evan Larkin

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 7

You know that feeling you got when you were a little kid on Christmas Eve? When you still thought Santa existed, and you kept out cookies and milk, and didn't give it a second thought that this fat jolly old man could squeeze down your chimney? When you'd look out your window hoping for a glimpse of a reindeer, and go to sleep early in the hopes that Christmas day would come faster,

, if only you could just close your eyes?

Well, that's how I felt about Valentine's Day.

It was that same bubbling excitement that came over you as you rushed down the stairs in your pj's to look under the tree, the same bated breath as you ripped open the candy striped wrapping paper…

Only it didn’t have an expiry date.

Love didn’t cease to exist once you reached a certain age. It was always there, in every language, culture and era.

it was ageless,

.

It was the one day in the year you could get away with the cheesiest, most sappy show of affection without getting even a sideways glance.

To me, it was the closest to magic you could get.

And yes, maybe it was commercialized; maybe these days’ people could put a price on love, but it was so much more to me than that.

It was the day you smiled at that stranger on the bus, left a Happy Valentine’s Day note on your friends desk, left a flower or a rose for someone who meant anything to you, in the hopes that maybe, just maybe you made their day a little better, a little brighter.

And if any or those things were left for you, you’d know that at least for a moment, at least for today, maybe someone you never knew, or overlooked, was thinking of you. And that’s enough.

I grabbed the container of cookies I’d made the night before and hauled it to the car.

It would have been warm today without the breeze, one of those days where the weather couldn’t seem to decide if it was sunny or gloomy.

Of course in this town warm could turn to blazing and gloomy to a blizzard in a heartbeat. The only thing guaranteed was bad roads, but even that couldn’t dampen my mood.

All the radio stations were playing love songs, getting callers in to announce their love on the air, confess a crush they’d had for years; it was so sweet.

I lived for this stuff.

I wondered what it would be like for those people, the ones who turned on the radio like they always did in the morning and realized they were the one being talked about.

Of course, there were also the anti-V-Day stations, where the callers told about their heartbreaks or bad relationships, why they didn’t believe in love.

I couldn’t even fathom that.

How could you not believe in love?

No matter how bad things got, or what someone did there would always be

to love, the perfect sunset, good friends, a kind act from a complete stranger…

That was the beauty of love, there was never a shortage of it, and I just didn’t understand how you could completely lose your faith in it.

I switched off the radio as the school came into sight and just turned off the car when I got a text from Mandy saying she was at my locker.

Walking into the school I came to a complete stop.

It looked like a confetti machine had exploded red and pink decorations all over the school.

Hanging down from the rafters were winged cupids, bunches of balloons were string up around the main doors, streamers crisscrossed the ceiling and along the walls as far as I could see.

For a moment I thought I had to be dreaming.

The student's union had really gone all out, first selling chocolate roses all week and now all these decorations, many of which looked handmade, it must have taken hours.

After standing for a moment or two in awe I slowly walked down the hall to my locker. Along the way I noticed everyone's locker had a cutout red or pink heart with a name written on it.

Mandy waved excitedly when I turned the corner fluttering a cutout heart at me, presumably from her locker.

"There you are Ary, you must be loving this"

I grinned and pulled the heart off my locker.

"What's this about?"

"Scavenger hunt, you have to find the person on your card and then go down to the office to get a form for things you have to find around the school. Winners get two tickets each to Caesar's Restaurant"

"No way, that place is beautiful and I've only seen in from the outside, I really

be dreaming, don’t pinch me”

She laughed and looked over my shoulder at my card.

“So, do you know an Evan Larkin?”

“He’s in my history class”

“You’re lucky, I have no idea who this Danny Sinclair is, but I’m crossing my fingers for hot and single, Jeremy’s getting boring”

“Have a heart Mandy, don’t break up with the guy on Valentine’s Day”

“Relax, I said

bored, I’m not breaking up with him, I’m just keeping my options open”

“I—“

“Hey girlies!”

We both looked down the hall to see Paige Summers rushing towards us, and my jaw dropped just the slightest.

She was wearing a bright red dress that was entirely too short for the way she was half running towards us, which I guess explained why half the boys in the hall were looking, and a pair of sparkly red pumps that were completely impractical for the weather and looked like they came right from a Dorothy-gone-wild version of the Wizard of Oz.

“Wow, and I thought

liked the holiday too much” Mandy said quietly, voicing my thoughts as Paige came to stand in front of us.

“Well, what do you think?” She said giving a twirl.

She somehow managed not to look slutty, owing to the glitter in her hair and around her eyes that added a small amount of innocence, but it was a close call.

I was saved the trouble of coming up with a suitable compliment when Mandy blurted out “You look great!”

Paige beamed at us, obviously not catching the strain in Amanda’s voice like I had, which was probably for the best.

“Don’t you just

Valentine’s Day?”

“Apparently not as much as you” I said with a faint smile.

“I got paired with Jeremy Ford for the scavenger hunt which is just

awesome, that boy is

” She said, holding up the red heart with his name on it.

I registered the name Paige had said seconds before Mandy spoke up beside me.

“I know, he’s my boyfriend”

Was I hearing things, or did Mandy just sound possessive?

Guess there was a first time for everything, because I’d never seen my best friend feel threatened by any girl.

And even more surprising, I felt slightly annoyed that Paige would check out another guy when she already had a

boyfriend, even though Amanda did that all the time. I think I might actually have been jealous.

I told myself it wasn't because that boyfriend was Wes; that would be ridiculous.

I was just annoyed that she didn't seem to appreciate him.

Exactly.

Not jealous

.

"Well don't worry girlfriend, he's safe with me" She winked like they were sharing some kind of inside joke.

I felt uneasy about it all and judging by Mandy's tense smile, I wasn't the only one.

"Anyway, Wes has such a great night planned, he showed up at my locker with a dozen roses this morning, isn't he the sweetest? And to top it off he even wrote me a Happy Valentine's Day message in the school paper"

Mandy shot me a look and I wondered what she was thinking, or if she knew that now I really might have been, just the slightest bit, jealous.

"Look at the time Arya, we've got to get to class," She said, grabbing my arm and pulling us away from Paige. "It's all the way in the science wing" She tried to say apologetically.

Paige winked at us and twirled once, for whose benefit I have no idea. "Of course, I'll see you lovely ladies at lunch!"

"Great…" We said simultaneously.

Amanda grabbed a copy of the Mindbender as we passed the office to class, like she knew I'd need to see for myself.

Having left Paige so quickly we got to class early and spread the paper out in front of us.

"She wasn't lying, there it is," I said calmly

Not that I'd expected her to be lying, I'd just hoped she was mistaken, and then immediately I felt guilty for thinking that.

She was lucky to have such a great boyfriend.

Unlike me she probably didn't wait in the sidelines for a guy she liked to notice her, she'd clearly gone out and done something about it since he didn't seem the type to make the first move.

I tried to convince myself it was no big deal, it shouldn't have been, but I was starting to get why people disliked being alone on V-Day so much.

"That should cheer you up Mandy, looks like your secret admirer strikes again" I said, pointing to another post.

She rolled her eyes "There are tons of girls in the school whose names start with A"

"But there's only one Amanda Royce in this school, and I distinctly remember him asking you out the last time he wrote"

"Whatever, I'm taken," She said with a shrug.

It was very un-Mandy-like to shrug off attention from a guy, but maybe she was more loyal to Jeremy than I'd given her

credit for.

When I gave her a skeptical look she just laughed and pointed back at the paper.

“Looks like your mystery boy is having some back luck in love too”

“Well good for him, at least he’s not still waiting around for a girl who doesn’t notice him”

“Ohh look at this one, so cute”

“Alright class, settle down. Now in the spirit of Valentine’s Day we’re going to learn about the anatomy of the heart, even though it’s not strictly in the curriculum for this class” Ms. Daniels exclaimed with a clap of her hands.

There was a collective groan throughout the room. Leave it to Ms. Daniels to pick a hard topic we didn’t have to learn about and think she was being nice.

We spent the next hour and a half labeling a series of diagrams we wouldn’t be tested on until the bell finally rang.

“Thank goodness, why couldn’t we just learn the anatomy of those hearts” Amanda said in exasperation, pointing to the decorations around the school.

“Cheer up, next period they hand out the chocolate roses”

She grinned at that and wiggled her eyebrows. “Let me know if you get any good ones”

We separated at the end of the hall and I headed upstairs to English.

“Hey Valentine” I looked up in surprise to see none other than Evan Larkin walking next to me with a wide smile on his face.

And let me just say, he was

taller up close.

“Hey Evan”

Another thing I hadn’t told Amanda, and which she obviously hadn’t noticed, was that Evan was one of the rowdy boys at the corner table that had continued to make a scene every time we walked by.

She loved the attention but had never bothered to see who she was getting it from, typical Mandy.

“Well it seems the fates have conspired to pair us together,” He said dramatically, throwing an arm around my shoulders.

The action threw me off guard and I couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“Don’t you have a class to get to?” Was the best I could come up with, not exactly brilliant, or relevant, but I wasn’t used to talking to such confident guys.

“Why yes I do, chemistry in fact, but not the kind we have,” he said with a wink.

I found myself slightly flustered again.

Who said that to a complete stranger?

“Right chemistry… Isn’t that the other way?”

“Well, I couldn’t very well pass up the chance to walk my Valentine to class”

“Um—“

“Meet me near the office after class. Those Caesar’s tickets will be ours, and it’s so much easier asking a girl out when you have somewhere to take them. Especially somewhere

”

Before I could even begin to reply he was running off the way we’d come, disappearing into the crowd as the bell rang.

I dropped in my seat feeling slightly dazed.

That conversation, or lack thereof; I didn’t really know what it was exactly, felt like I’d just run a marathon. And lost the track.

Mrs. Jenkins walked into class just then and shut the door hard behind her, stopping all the excited murmuring about chocolate roses.

“Miss. Kelsey, if you would start us off, Act 3, Scene 2”

I flipped my copy of

to the right page in case I had to read, but didn’t even bother paying attention after that.

Reading old English script was almost second nature to me and I didn’t need Mrs. Jenkins commentary to tell me what

meant.

My phone vibrated from my bag and with a quick glance around, I pulled it out and hid it under my desk. I opened Mandy’s text to see a picture of a guy hunched over a desk and the message

I almost had to laugh. Only she would pull out her phone in class and take a picture of the guy.

‘

I texted back.

We continued back and forth until the last half hour of class when our lecture was mercifully interrupted by the arrival of the roses.

The class looked noticeably excited, and the Student’s Union had written out cards with a cute quote for everyone so that all the students would be guaranteed at least one.

Even the most skeptic about love wore the hint of a smile when they were handed their chocolate rose.

The good mood was contagious.

I was surprised when a set of three landed on my desk.

One was from the Student’s Union and another from Mandy, hers with funny message.

The third only had a lopsided heart drawn on the front. I flipped the card over looking for a name, and then had to blink to make sure I was really seeing this.

Four little words, but for a moment I couldn't breath, because this couldn't really be happening, there was just no way I was seeing this right.

I was convinced it was a dream, my own silly fantasies running away with me, but I couldn't make up this feeling.

And it was perfect.

From the adorable lopsided heart only a guy could draw to the messy writing trying to be neat.

Perfect.

Class couldn’t end soon enough; I

to find Mandy. She’d known him; she could tell me if it was his writing. I didn’t want to dare believe it until then.

I nearly jumped out of my seat when the bell rang and raced down the hallway towards Mandy’s class, I knew I should be going to meet Evan but this would only take a moment.

“Arya”

I turned around slowly.

It was Michael Conner.

Just like that the halls seemed to be empty, and I forgot where I’d been heading or who I’d been looking for.

He was wearing a plain white oxford with a red tie hang loosely around his neck that was covered with little cupids and hearts. It was totally dorky and completely adorable.

I belatedly realized he’d said my name again.

“Hey Michael”

“So I see you got the rose”

I bit my lip to keep from grinning like an idiot and nodded.

Inside my head, I was freaking out a little. It really was from him.

“Thanks, it was really sweet”

“I was hoping you’d say that”

My face got hot with a blush and I wondered how exactly to reply to that, but he wasn’t finished.

“…I was also hoping you didn’t have any plans tonight?” He held out a pair of tickets for

and ran the other hand nervously through his hair.

No.

Way.

Michael Conner was asking me out.

Now I couldn’t stop the goofy smile. “I’ve been wanting to see that”

He looked relieved and smiled, “Great, it starts at 7, meet me at the theater?”

“Definitely”

With one last brilliant smile he turned away, I watched pathetically until he turned a corner and only then managed to look away and slowly come back to reality.

No wonder I loved Valentine’s Day.

The halls had cleared out, and I felt guilty realizing Evan was probably waiting for me, but now I

wanted to find Mandy.

I just needed to make sure this was real, that it was actually happening.

Making my way down to the cafeteria, I took a turn down the hall in the opposite direction Michael had gone.

Just before I made it to the doors I saw Mandy down a side hall and was about to call out to her before realizing she with someone.

But not with just anyone, she was talking with Wes Pierson.

Of all people, he would have been my last guess.

She was leaning against the lockers, frowning slightly while he stood in front of her, his back to me, talking quietly.

Unconsciously I took a step back, confused at what I was seeing.

Why would she be talking to him anyway? Was it something to do with Paige?

I had no idea, but I didn’t stick around long enough to find out. He did like her, and it was Valentine’s Day. It was just oddly disappointing.

I tried to shake the image out of my head, it wasn’t any of my business, and anyway, I had a date with Michael Conner.

The thought brought a smile to my face.

I’d only pictured this moment a thousand times, and it was finally happening tonight.

“There you are Valentine, I thought you’d stood me up,” Evan said, pouting adorably.

I smiled apologetically, not even having realized I was already near the office, “Sorry, I had to do something first”

He smiled immediately, not looking even the least bit annoyed as he threw his arm over my shoulder yet again and directed our steps toward the office.

Alone on Cloud 9 (8)

So I've decided that there just aren't enough hours in the day. This chapter had been almost done over the weekend but the second school started I didn't even have time to look at it. On top of that I've had piles of work and been sick but I do love this chapter so I hope it ends up being worth the wait. Thanks for putting up with my terrible uploading delays.

You can now find me on Facebook, look for Celia Rhodes, or join the group xoStardust

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 8

"I can't believe the nerve of him!"

"I know"

"Seriously, how can he just waltz in here everyday like he

the place?" Grace fumed from across the counter.

She crossed her arms over her chest and leveled a glare at the back of his head, letting out a huff of indignation.

"Because everyone lets him. Look at the way they all keep glancing over in his direction, just

are they waiting for? Whatever it is, it's hardly worth it. I would know." I said bitterly.

I realized I had been angrily scrubbing the counter in the same spot for the last few minutes and tossed the rag aside with a sigh.

He'd been back now for a week, and like clockwork showed up minutes after my shift started at the cafe.

I didn't know what his game was, what he was trying to prove, but if he was trying to get to me, it was working.

The first day should have been the hardest, but every day since had been like falling repeatedly on a bruise; initially it felt worse and then it just got numb.

"I just wish there was something I could do," She said with a sigh. "Maybe I could go find that baseball bat…?"

I laughed and shook my head, though in reality I'd already had that visual image several times.

"He's not worth it, and besides I can't let anything happen here, I need this job"

Unfortunately, it was something Michael had caught on to. He knew I wouldn't let my anger get the best of me here.

He knew he could damn well get away with anything.

But it was all under the radar.

For better or worse, Moonbeams had somehow become neutral ground.

The incredulous looks he'd received the first day had been happening with less frequency, people were getting used to his being back in town, which may have been what he wanted all along.

But always, always, when he approached the counter for his increasingly specific coffee orders we would have an audience.

Eyes greedy for drama watched the exchange, waiting for the confrontation.

As far as anyone saw we treated each other cordially, it was only in the subtle looks and seemingly innocent comments across the counter where our battle of wills took place.

It made me feel like we were a ticking bomb and they were just waiting for us to go off.

But I couldn’t let that happen.

"Uh-oh, speak of the devil, incoming at 6'o clock… I mean 12'o clock, wait, how does that work?"

I was safe behind the counter I told myself, safe in my role as a barista, this was neutral ground, but I tensed up all the same.

"Hey Arya"

"Michael"

There was a moment’s tense silence between us, which had the distinct feeling you only get during a staring contest.

"It’s rude to ignore a pretty girl you know, I'm Grace"

We both blinked and looked towards Grace, for a second I'd forgotten she was there. Michael recovered first and stuck his hand out, player's smile immediately in place.

"Pleasure to meet you Grace"

She glanced down at his hand and then back up to meet his eyes.

"I don't like you"

He looked puzzled, and just that was enough to make me want to laugh, but I refrained.

"Err, right. Good to know" He said slowly running his outstretched hand through his hair.

There was just something so

about seeing him confused.

She rolled her eyes at him and took a few steps to the side, waiting at the end of the counter like my own personal bodyguard.

The whole thing was just so un-Grace-like I couldn't help but smile, try as I might to keep a straight face.

He shrugged, and turned back to me, ready for round two.

"Nice day"

"It was"

He lips twitched up just slightly, the semblance of a smile, but it was unconscious, like he was trying not to, and that worried me.

Sure, he was still his overconfident superior self, but now and then over the last three days I'd seen it, the hint of a real smile. A rarity, and only distinguishable because I'd never seen it directed at me before.

Definitely cause to worry.

It was like the calm before a storm, those few moments of peace and stagnant silence that held a sense of foreboding for any who listened close enough to hear it.

But I had no idea what it meant, and it always put

one step ahead.

"I'll have a medium upside down, half-cafe, caramel maachiato, double shot, extra foam"

The smirk that followed made it obvious this order, like the rest, was designed to annoy me.

Fine.

He could have whatever little triumph was afforded him by holding up the line with his pathetic specifications, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of reacting, or messing up the order.

I'd been working here long enough to mix that up in my sleep, he could have his perfect coffee, and choke on it for all I cared.

Forcing a smile I turned back to the machine. Ordering coffee was the only reasonable excuse he had for talking to me, and the faster I gave him his drink, the sooner he was out of my sight.

"Medium upside down, half-cafe, caramel maachiato, double shot, extra foam" I repeated as I slid the drink across the counter towards him.

He smiled widely and brought the cup up to his lips, taking a long sip and sighing contentedly, dallying unnecessarily.

"Perfect as always Ary"

He pulled out his money, hand fumbling with the wallet in an exaggerated manner that had to be purposeful, before finally dropping some coins down on the counter.

He winked, "Keep the change babe"

"And Grace, it really

a pleasure"

The coins continued to clatter as he made his way back across the café, drumming their mocking beat in time to his steps.

***

I closed the door quietly behind me, but I needn't have worried, they were both asleep. It was one of the only perks of working on a school night.

Not wanting to turn on any lights I ran my hand along the wall and tiptoed up the stairs to my room, tossing by backpack and keys on the bed before reaching blindly for my desk lamp.

I waited for the small halo of light to illuminate the bed before crouching down and looking under it.

There.

Right at the back, just where I'd left it two years ago...

I pulled out the box, blowing off a thin layer of dust that should have had two years to accumulate, but in reality only ever stayed untouched for a few months at a time.

As always when I pulled it out I felt guilty.

Guilty that I still held on to these things, that I hadn't thrown them away like Grace had advised, that I still came back to them over and over.

But even so I opened the lid, peered into a world full of memories that should have been long gone, a mirror into the past.

It had finally caught up to me.

I'd held out a week, but I couldn't resist any longer.

I pulled out the first thing in the box, my playbill from

.

Every surface on it was filled with signatures and messages from the cast.

You could tell how many cards the person had signed by how sloppy their handwriting was by the time they got to yours.

He'd talked to me that day, the first real conversation we'd ever had, and seeing him at work everyday, even a week later, felt like that first tug on my arm to pull me out of the crowd. That surprise as your heart jumps into your throat, that moment when your whole body tenses up in defense before you recognize the person and relax.

Only I never relaxed. I couldn't afford to keep my guard down for one minute around him.

Maybe I was crazy to keep it, but looking at all the names I could still remember the cast party, all of us giddy with that last reserves of adrenaline that only comes after the last show, when you're overtired, overspent, and completely, unequivocally, deliriously happy.

But that day could have been nothing, it might have been nothing more than a well wish until…

There it was.

The card that had started everything.

To think, my life might be completely different if it hadn't been for those four words, those three insignificant ellipses.

What if I hadn't gotten the card?

What if he hadn't sent it?

What if I hadn't run into him in the hall just after?

What if I'd gone to meet Evan?

What if, what if,

My fingers hovered over the edge, but even now, even after everything, I couldn't bare to rip it up. It was the rational thing to do, the obvious solution, but I couldn't do it.

With a sigh I tossed it back in, rummaging through a year’s worth of notes and messages and cards, not all from Michael, but if they weren’t from him they were about him.

Dozens of folded up scraps of paper, notes passed back and forth during class between Mandy and I, inside jokes and private nicknames so only we would know who was being talked about.

Just underneath a pile of them was the ticket stub from

.

We'd had so much fun that night.

Everything had been perfect, but of course that should have been my first sign.

Nothing that perfect could be real.

I'd never have guessed he was using me, never have thought he was such a good actor, far better than I'd ever been.

Even when the signs were clear, even when I knew it was over… but he wouldn't have stopped until he finished what he'd set out to do.

I couldn't have saved myself even if I'd known…

But that didn't make it any easier.

It was all so much more real now that he was back again. The memories that had started to get hazy were sharp, as if focused by a camera, and they flashed behind my eyes, one snapshot after another with a single word labeling them all.

.

My hand hesitated over the box before I reached in to pull out the one thing I really came here for, and of course,

buried at the bottom like I knew it would be, a note from that day.

Another turning point, maybe even two.

At least the other stuff I kept held good memories, whatever little value they were, but

... I had no idea why I still held on to it.

Maybe I just needed the proof.

Proof that

had really happened.

Because what hurt more than what he'd done, than what he'd been doing all along, was that I'd been so completely, utterly wrong about him.

It changes a person, when you realize you've misjudged someone so badly, when everything you thought you knew about them turns out to be a lie, nothing more than the image they let you believe.

An illusion, a complete deception of the person they really are.

It changes you.

I threw everything back in the box and shoved it into the furthest recesses of the bed, but even after closing my eyes the memories swirled around me, just waiting to explode.

***

Something was off today.

It was obvious in the shifty looks and general unease around the school as I put my books away after second period.

I didn’t know what it meant, but I could easily guess who had caused it.

Which most likely meant he'd done

to draw attention, since most of the tension had dissipated days ago.

I closed my locker and jumped back with a start at seeing Evan standing there.

“When did you get here?”

Without answering he crossed his arms and stood in front of me, blocking my view of the hall.

"Is he bothering you Arya?"

"You always bother me Evan,” I said with a smirk.

His expression changed from serious to surprised, and then sagged just slightly in relief. "You haven't heard?"

"No, but it must be bad if you're actually calling me by my name" I said suspiciously.

"Very funny hobbit. I would never call you by your real name” He said mock seriously. “But on another and completely unrelated note, which has no relevance to my previous question, how do you feel about skipping the rest of the day?"

I gave him a skeptical look, which he responded to with an innocent smile.

"You're acting even stranger than usual Evs, should I be worried?"

"Well--" He looked down the hall from where he’d come and grimaced.

I turned to look, but hadn't seen the cause of his frown before he'd thrown an arm around my shoulders and began forcibly leading me in the opposite direction.

"Evan seriously, what's going on?"

He didn't answer, just kept pulling me along.

I should have known he wouldn’t be content with calm waters for long.

It just wasn’t the ‘Michael’ way.

I had to take two steps for every one of Evan’s long strides, and with how fast he was walking I was nearly jogging to keep up.

We turned at the end of the hall and he finally slowed down. I took the moment to push his arm off and kept walking.

It was useless of course; within two steps he was caught up, smiling widely as usual, like the last few minutes hadn't happened.

"Well as much as I enjoyed whatever

was supposed to be, you can go now,” I said, rolling my eyes at him.

"And deprive you of the pleasure of my company? That would just be selfish"

I was just about to retort when I saw a familiar head of messy brown hair.

"Wes!"

He looked up, startled, and a pile of books he'd been putting into his locker dropped to the floor, scattering around.

Looking embarrassed he mumbled a 'hello' before bending down to collect everything.

I picked up the papers on my way to him while Evan strolled along beside me, not even bothered to help.

I shot him an annoyed look, but he just grinned cheerfully in response and leaned against the lockers.

"How do I get rid of him?" I asked Wes, poking Evan in the stomach.

He looked amused and the boys exchanged a look before turning back to me.

"I have no idea"

"But you're his best friend"

"I know, I've been trying to get rid of him since the third grade"

"Hey! I'm standing right here, and I’m offended. Here I am offering up my services to you with no appreciation" He said to me indignantly.

"What services exactly?"

"Suppose an armed assassin came barreling into the school right now and pulled out a gun? What would you do without

me to protect you?"

"Right, because the chances of that happening are

high. Besides, you'd hardly be much use if guns were involved"

He shot me a scathing look.

"Suppose someone

and the science hall erupted into flames? What would you do if I weren't here to carry you out?"

"Well if we're talking about a fire in the science wing, you're not a very good bodyguard considering we were further away

you dragged me here"

He waved a hand, "Technicalities"

"I'm confused, is this about Michael?" Wes interjected.

My eyes shot to him immediately.

"I mean… ummm"

Looking at him curiously I noticed he was staring over my shoulder.

I turned to glare accusingly at Evan and saw him making 'shut up' motions at Wes, which he cut off abruptly when I caught him.

"I knew it, what did he do?"

Wes glanced over my shoulder again, and I knew Evan must have been telling him to keep quiet.

“You think she’s not going to find out man?”

“Find out

”

They exchanged another look.

Frustrated, I tried to walk away, determined to find out for myself if they wouldn’t tell me, but Evan threw out an arm to stop me, and I couldn’t exactly get away.

“Fine, tell her”

I crossed my arms and looked expectantly at Wes.

“He’s here”

“Excuse me?”

“Michael’s here. At school.”

Time seemed to come to a standstill, and I hoped I’d wake up from whatever twisted dream I was having because

, this

could

be happening.

“…He showed up halfway through second period…”

But of course he was here,

.

And it was not fair. This kind of thing was only supposed to happen in the books.

“…Got a visitors pass at the office and I guess someone saw and then everyone knew…”

I’d thought him showing up at the Café was bad, but this was so

worse.

I felt disoriented, like I was back in grade 10 all over again, like

had changed.

Because he may have been back a week ago, but now he was

back, back at the school, back to where it had all started.

“Is she okay?”

Suddenly it was like his locker was across the hall from mine again, and he was there,

“Ary?”

Now there, around the corner, laughing with his friends, the laugh I knew so well echoing down the halls, stopping in the middle of a conversation, lost in thought,

.

“Hobbit?”

And again, coming out of a classroom, eyes locked with mine, a nod of the head, brushing his hand through his hair,

, a hand raised in a half wave before he turned away.

I blinked furiously to clear the images, the memories, each more potent than the last.

He couldn't be here.

But he was.

"ARYA"

I jolted around, flinched back, but I could breathe again.

And then, from down the hall, timed like any climactic scene in any teenage movie, the specter himself.

Seeing him in these halls again, like he'd never left, like nothing had changed when

had…

It was the like the confusion of flipping to the very back of a book and reading the last page. You have no idea of the plot or characters, nothing but a few lines that don't mean anything.

That's was it was like seeing him here, so out of context I couldn't even process it.

I thought I must be dreaming, but he was still here, coming closer every second with none other than Paige Summers on his arm.

Of course, ‘

,’ it shouldn't have surprised me.

She'd probably been the one to invite him.

From the bored look on his face as she chattered away at him I could tell they weren’t dating, he wasn’t even trying.

And Michael

tried.

Well, he'd picked the wrong ally, no one paid much attention to Paige after that 10th grade scandal, but it still unnerved me.

Amanda walked sullenly beside them, hardly daring to look up.

She was so different from the girl I’d been best friends with I hardly recognized her, and despite not being friends with her now I was curious.

Only two weeks ago she and Paige had been laughing over a magazine and now she trailed along half a step behind like some lost puppy.

It was so pitiful I almost felt bad.

Wordlessly, Evan and Wes moved to stand on either side of me, looking casual but tense as they took a step just slightly in front of me.

Maybe Evan hadn’t been completely off base with that whole bodyguard thing.

“Arya! Wes!”

I cringed mentally as Paige flounced up to us, yanking Michael along behind her.

“Look at this! The five of us back together again”

No one had anything to say in response.

I know I for one could have done without the reunion; Wes seemed to share the opinion, while Michael looked indifferent and Amanda studied the floor.

Evan on the other hand, looked almost affronted at being left out, though he still didn’t seem any happier about the situation than the rest of us.

I wondered where she was going with this, but I didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“It’s just like old times, before things got complicated, don’t you wish we could go back?”

Her words were directed at Wes, and even while she had one arm firmly gripping Michael’s sleeve, the other went to rest on Wes’s shoulder.

Well, well, so that’s why she was here. It wasn’t about me at all.

The disbelieving look on Wes’ face was almost comical, but the matching one on Michael’s face was priceless.

If I didn’t hate her so much I would have thanked her.

Meanwhile Wes shrugged her arm off and took a step back, even though his gaze remained locked on hers.

“Don’t even Paige. If I could go back it wouldn’t be for you.”

His words were spoken softly, almost sad, but Paige seemed to shrink back as if stung, something so unprecedented even Mandy looked up.

I didn’t fully understand the look that passed between them, but I had a feeling more had happened than what the rest of the school had known.

She opened her mouth like she wanted to reply, but no words came out. I was as surprised as the rest.

“Well… it was… nice catching up”

Her voice was only slightly shaky, not quite matching her usual level of sugary sweetness.

“We should… do this again sometime,” And then she was walking away, ignoring me completely.

Michael caught my eye as they passed, a smirk already flitting across his face, a wink before he turned away.

And just like that I felt like hurling.

The boys only let out a breath when the trio was out of sight and finally turned back to look at me, but I was already backing away.

“Alright Ary?” I couldn’t bring myself to look at Wes, even though I could feel his gaze on me.

Maybe it was silly, but I hated that he, of all people, had to see how much Michael still got to me, even without doing a thing.

At the café it had been different, there I’d been angry, and two years ago the wounds had been fresh, now though…

now it was two years later and I was just the same, weak, pathetic… afraid.

“Fine, I just… I need to be alone for a while… I… thanks”

I kept backing away, whirling around to get away faster.

With two long strides Evan caught up and threw his arms around me, in what I assumed he considered a hug. It felt more like being smothered to me, but I appreciated the thought.

“Don’t worry little Red, we’ll make the Big Bad Wolf leave you alone”

Despite myself I smiled.

“I’ll hold you to that Evs”

I could still feel Wes watching me as I made my way down the hall and made sure my legs didn’t shake until I had turned the corner.

I wandered the halls alone, not really heading for anything in particular, but all too soon I found myself facing the doors to the cafeteria.

I knew it was irrational, but I still couldn’t bring myself to go in.

Footsteps sounded from behind me and I ducked down a hallway to the side before anyone could see me.

To say I was surprised when I realized it was Michael would be an understatement.

I thought he would be inside already, holding court at his old table, staying visible and making his statement, whatever it

was.

He reached for the door handle and I waited for him to disappear inside so I could leave, when he stopped.

Just stopped.

As if frozen his hang hovered over the handle for a beat, then two before he pulled it back and ran it through his hair, as if that had been the intention all along.

Then he just stared.

Taking a step back from the doors he turned around and his eyes landed directly on me.

Our gazes locked for only a second before he started walking quickly back the way he’d come past me, but I recognized it.

I’d seen that look reflected in my own eyes a thousand times, weary, anxious, almost,

afraid.

The same look I’d been wearing just seconds ago.

And for the first time in two years, even if it was just for a moment, I actually understood Michael Conner.

Because I knew that feeling, knew it everyday I walked past those doors.

It was like being afraid of the dark.

You’re not actually afraid of the absence of light, but more of what it hides, of not being able to see, of the way your familiar room can be transformed into a labyrinth of

shadows, and noises that would be normal during the day suddenly feel sinister.

The cafeteria worked the same way. I was afraid of what I would be reminded of, what memories, what sight and sounds it would bring back, and though I'd tried to forget it, he had been as much a casualty of that day as I had.

Yes he'd started it, but at the end of the day he'd run from the cafeteria as fast as I had.

What I'd seen just now, I could almost understand why he thought I owed him an apology.

Almost.

But I hadn't initiated anything. That was… actually I still don't know who started it, just that it had been the trigger.

One move and suddenly the whole cafeteria had been involved, angry and scowling and standing up for me.

So I could almost see it.

But I hadn't asked them to do it, hadn't even known what was happening until it was over.

It's not like it was planned, it was just one of those things that

.

Like a mob scene, one started and the rest followed.

Maybe I'd planted the seed, though really I'd only answered the question they'd all been asking;

.

And that was enough. The trigger. The reason everyone in this school, whether they'd been there or not, knew his name and mine.

.

Alone on Cloud 9 (9)

I added a cast to the story, if you want to check it out.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 9

Really I should have known something was coming, it was far too quiet in the house.

My mother sat at the table with a mug of coffee in her hands while my father leaned against the back counter looking at the paper. By the frequent glances over the top of the page it was obvious he wasn't reading it.

I moved around cautiously, wondering when the dam would break, because this tentative silence couldn't possibly last.

Where was the shouting? The complaints?

It didn't take much to get them started.

I wondered what could possibly have prompted this ceasefire, and then I realized their eyes kept shooting up to me.

Shit.

I hurried my movements, deciding it was best to get out of there fast, but of course that wasn’t happening.

"Arya can we speak to you for a moment?"

As if I had a choice.

Hesitantly I sat down across from her, only sitting at the very edge of the chair in case I needed to make a quick exit.

I didn’t know what I could have done to prompt this; my grades were fine, I came right home after school, called if I didn’t, I—

"We were just wondering when you planned to introduce us to your new boyfriend"

My mouth dropped open.

Nothing could have possibly been more shocking to hear.

She didn't even look mad, only mildly curious.

By this point my dad had abandoned his paper entirely, looking uncomfortable but just as curious.

Instantly I felt embarrassed.

How did they even

about Michael?

“Mom he's not my boyfriend" I mumbled.

"Well you certainly spend a lot of time with him, what would you call it then?"

I shifted around in my seat, only the 'birds and bees' talk could be more awkward than this.

And I

didn't want to tell them, but at the same time I felt compelled to.

"We're just hanging out, I mean… it’s… um… we’re friends, it’s just not quite there yet"

They shared a look between them, and even though I couldn't see it I had a pretty good idea what it looked like.

I was just as confused.

She turned back to me.

"Well, we'd like to meet him anyway"

I visibly winced.

Their eyes stayed on me and I knew they were waiting for a response so I meekly nodded my head, but it was all for show.

No way in hell was I bringing anyone, much less

home to meet my parents.

I didn't trust them to be able to last without fighting.

“How about this Friday?”

I felt myself nodding again before I could even register the action.

"Good, that's settled then"

She pushed away from the table and grabbed her bag off the counter, going the long way around to avoid where my dad was standing.

I waited until the front door slammed shut behind her before getting up to leave, but a slight 'ahem' from my father stopped me.

His face was weary and slightly embarrassed, and I thought for one dreadful second I

about to get a refresher course on the 'birds and the bees'.

"How well do you really know this boy Arya?"

Ok, not the question I was expecting, but I still wasn’t quite relieved.

"All year dad"

That was partially true, I'd kept tabs on him since almost the first day.

Dad let out a sigh and seemed to be thinking his next words over carefully.

"I’ve seen this Conner boy around and I just don’t trust… he just doesn’t seem serious"

My mouth dropped open in shock.

On the one hand I was baffled as to where my father could have run into Michael, on the other I was slightly annoyed that he could make so quick a judgment without having even met him.

I think I knew Michael just a bit better.

"Thanks dad, but forgive me if I’m a little skeptical about taking relationship advice from you. He

me, which is a hell of a lot more than I can say for you and mom—”

"Whatever you may think I'm still your father, and I just don't want to see you get hurt"

I wished he would just get mad, yell, or ground me, or something, because his calm voice just made me feel like a child.

But at the same time I couldn't argue back. Because I wanted to believe it, wanted to think that every now and then they remembered they had a daughter, and cared.

"You'll see dad, Michael's not like that,” I whispered.

At first I didn't realized what he was doing, and then he was hugging me, the first I'd had in such a long time I couldn't help throwing my arms around him in return.

This must be what it felt like, for all those other families.

***

I was still in a bit of a daze when I got to school, I must have been, because I didn't even notice Paige sitting down in front of my locker until I almost tripped over her.

"Morning Arya, got your favorite"

“Thanks Paige, Happy Birthaday”

She grinned and held up a large paper cup, heaped with whip cream and still steaming through a little hole in the layer of froth.

I smiled my thanks and let myself slide down the locker to sit next to her.

We both sat drinking our coffee, and it was a comfortable silence. The kind you could only have with friends, and it still surprised me, because I never thought I would be friends with Paige Summers.

She’d been oddly persistent to hang out with Mandy and me, but I only gave in because of Wes.

I'll admit I'd been skeptic at first, but now I was starting to see it, why he liked her that is.

And they always looked so cute together, holding hands down the hall that I had to give her a chance.

She was a whole different person with him, no more forced cheer or trying too hard, it was nice.

And anyway, I had Michael.

Michael freaking Conner.

And

was all mine.

Mine, mine, mine, well sort of, but anyway, there was no room to be jealous.

He

be mine, just as soon as—

A phone vibrated and Paige pulled out her cell.

I looked over her shoulder curiously when a bright smile lit up her face to see a cute animated text from Wes wishing her a happy birthday.

She sighed happily.

Okay, maybe I was just a

bit jealous.

I took a sip of my mocha, burning my tongue slightly until the whip cream mixed in to cool it off inside my mouth.

Delicious.

"Where do you buy this from Paige? It's so good"

"Moonbeams" She murmured, still staring at her phone.

"Never heard of it"

She finally looked away from the screen.

"I'm not surprised, it only opened up a few weeks ago. They bought out that old club, you know, the one on 34th?"

I wrinkled my nose slightly. "That dump? Are you sure the coffee's safe?"

She laughed, an amused smile making its way onto her face. "You'll see it tonight, they completely transformed the place, and I booked it for my party. They're hiring by the way, didn't you say you needed a job?"

I was about to respond when I saw him.

Michael.

And he was walking down the hall with a lazy grin, coming towards

.

Seeing him get closer, it was like the whole school disappeared, like it was just the two of us.

I forgot Paige sitting next to me, the perfect coffee in my hands getting colder by the second.

Because that look in his eyes, the way his smile turned up into a devastating grin… he had me.

Hook, line, and sinker.

It was like that moment in She's All That, you know, the one scene any girl can bring to mind just like that.

Seeing him there, I felt just a little bit like Laney walking down step by step in heels for the first time,

And it was just like that, those wobbly first steps, that rushing feel of excitement and nerves like you might trip and fall at any moment,

And he was my Zach, the kind of guy who could probably have anyone, and he liked me, but unlike Laney I didn’t even have to change, and that was the best part, that’s what made this even better than the movie, this was real.

“Morning ladies”

At some point I’d stood up, though I didn’t remember doing so, and belatedly remembered to nod.

“Happy Birthday Paige”

“Thanks Michael, you’re coming to my party tonight right?” She asked, standing up beside me.

He glanced over at me and smiled “Sure, long as Ary’s coming”

I blushed slightly and was saved the trouble of replying when Paige spoke up. “Of course she is”

“Then I’ll be there”

“What are you doing here so early?” I finally managed to say.

He grinning easily, “I came to walk you two lovely ladies to class”

I was beyond surprised.

I mean, we’d hung out a lot since Valentine’s day, eating lunch together, catching a few movies, hanging out at the arcade, but he’d never come to walk me to class,

I was making some progress.

“Well, my class is the other way and Wes is waiting, so you’ll just have to walk Arya to class” Paige said coyly, pushing me towards him with a subtle wink.

“I can do that”

Paige sauntered off down the hall and Michael threw his arm around my shoulders, and while I knew it was only friendly I couldn’t stop my heart from beating faster at the proximity.

“May I?” He nodded down at my hands and I realized I was still holding onto my mocha.

I nodded and he slipped it out to take a quick sip before giving it back.

I tried to remind myself of the conversation we'd had the first night we'd hung out together, at the theater to watch Letter's to Juliet.

He'd told me he liked me, just came right out and admitted it, but that he wasn't ready for a serious relationship because of some girl, blah, blah, blah, and could we just be friends first. I don't know how I'd responded, truthfully I had been too busy chanting

in my head.

But even so I couldn't help the little thrill of drinking from the cup just after he had.

Pathetic, I know.

We walked down towards the science wing, talking about some hockey game last night. Well, he talked, I mostly listened; as if I knew what a power play was.

"Here we are, bio right?"

I nodded as we stopped outside my classroom, and was secretly thrilled that he actually knew what class I had, especially since I was almost certain I'd never mentioned it before.

"Thanks for walking me"

"Anytime" He winked and walked away while I floated into class and took my usual seat by Amanda.

She had an eyebrow raised and a teasing grin on her face.

“Well that’s new”

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face as I answered. “He just showed up at my locker this morning”

She pushed me for details until Ms. Daniels came in, bringing our giggling conversation to a stop.

I pulled out my textbook and opened it to the right page, waiting for Ms. Daniels to start writing on the overhead before turning towards Amanda again.

"What was he like Mandy?" I whispered

She looked up from her notebook, "Who?"

"Michael, what was he like when you knew him?"

Her face took on a faraway look, but I couldn't decipher the feeling in her eyes.

"Michael… he always knew exactly what he wanted, never doubted it for a second. He told me he didn't believe in regrets. He can be unbelievably sweet, but he doesn't forgive people easily, and he expects a lot from his friends sometimes, he's—”

"Perfect" I finished dreamily.

Her smile was slightly weary and indulgent. "Is that your definition of perfect?"

“He’s

, he has his faults I’m sure, but they just make him more perfect”

She smiled for real at that. “He can be pretty special, but don’t get in over your head Ary”

"So what happened between you two? Why did you stop being friends?"

A shadow seemed to pass across her face, a streak of pain flashed through her eyes so fast I thought I must have imagined it.

Ms. Daniels turned back towards the class and we looked down at our books, quickly copying out the notes while she drowned on about last night’s assigned readings.

"I made a choice,” She murmured when the teacher’s back was turned once more.

Her voice was quiet, and I knew she wouldn't be saying anymore, but now I was doubly curious. What did that mean?

"Well… do you… regret your choice?"

She looked puzzled, like it was the first time she'd ever thought about the question, but slowly shook her head. "Never. I don't regret it for a second, but like I said, Michael doesn't forgive easily"

"I'm sorry Mandy"

She smiled, the creases on her forehead erased, "Don't be, I'm not, and now you don't have to share him"

I couldn't help but laugh slightly, earning a disproving look from Ms. Daniels.

Sinking slightly lower in my seat under her glare I went back to copying out the notes until the bell rang.

My next class dragged on, mostly because I didn’t have getting to see Michael at lunch to look forward to.

He had an appointment with the school’s guidance councilor about possible colleges.

It seemed so far off, but in reality graduation was only a few months away, and then he’d be gone.

I didn’t fool myself into believing he would attend the local college, and the closest good university was over an hour’s drive away, but I tried not to think about it.

Besides, if true love could overcome an evil stepfamily, or a poisoned apple, it could certainly survive

.

I wandered into history early and took a seat near the back; it had become a habit now that I didn’t have to rush here after drama rehearsals.

I told myself it was so that Mr. Andrews didn’t notice me falling asleep, but in reality it was just so I could sit behind Wes.

Don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t for any weird stalker-ish tendencies, truly, I just felt really intimidated sitting in front of him. Call me paranoid but I always felt like he could see everything I did, and then I was too nervous to do anything.

It was a problem.

The class filtered slowly in, with Wes being one of the last. He flashed me a shy grin that I automatically found myself returning. I reminded myself he only did it because Paige and I were friends, but it felt nice all the same.

Just before the bell rang Evan ran in, why he always needed to wait until the last second to sprint to class was beyond me.

I ducked my head down, hoping he would walk past me, or better yet, not notice me at all, but of course it was never that easy with Evan.

“Hello sugarplum, isn’t it a fair beautiful day?”

I wrinkled my nose at the nickname; he seemed to have a new one everyday.

“Sugarplum? I think you’re a few months late Evan”

He sighed dramatically, and loudly enough for a few people to glance curiously in our direction. At least Mr. Andrews didn’t hear.

“You’re right, but don’t worry my fair lady, these names are but trifles until I find the

name”

“How about, oh I don’t know, Arya?”

He looked at me like I was crazy, which was ridiculous since it was obvious that title belonged to him.

“Now where’s the fun in that?”

I refrained from rolling my eyes and tried to pay attention to the lecture. You would think World War I would be

interesting, but Mr. Andrews had a knack for turning even war into a monotonous experience.

And it didn’t help that Evan periodically made faces at the teacher every time he turned his back.

How immature.

I had to wonder how he could be one of Wes’s best friends, but in the mean time I tried not to look in his direction for fear of laughing.

French next period went by quickly, Mr. Green always kept things amusing and I always found the lessons quite easy, but I still couldn’t say much more than the basics out loud. The only reason I understood a word was because of Charlie, he’d gone to a French immersion elementary school and could speak almost as fluently as Mr. Green. I don’t know why he didn’t just skip ahead to French 30, but I wasn’t about to complain.

And then, finally, the last bell rang.

I jumped out of my seat and met Mandy at the foot of the stairs. We joined the mass going up and had to fight our way out of the crowd to turn down the hallway.

Just as we turned the corner I stopped dead in my tracks, because there he was.

Leaning back against my locker, throwing a ball up and down, waiting.

And in that moment he really was perfect, like he’d stepped right out of a fairy tale, and the novelty of it still hadn't worn off.

Mandy smiled and moved off towards her locker, leaving me walk in a daze down to my Prince Charming.

His head turned up as I approached, and immediately he smiled, the ball he'd thrown up dropping to the ground, forgotten.

It was like looking across a crowded dance floor, hundreds of bodies swirling back and forth between you, and then in a single moment you lock eyes with

You know who I’m talking about; the tall dark stranger in every girls’ fantasy, the Romeo to your Juliet, the Darcy to your Elizabeth, yeah,

And his eyes crinkle up with the slow start of a smile, lips barely curving up as if it were a secret between the two of you, a twinkle in his eyes you can manage to see all across the room that you know speaks volumes, and all those hundreds of writhing bodies between you? Well, they just disappear.

Walking down the hall towards him, I felt like I was on Cloud 9, too light to possibly stay anchored to the ground, like at any moment I would just float up and away, or wake up from a dream that was just too good to be true.

"Hey Michael"

“Ary”

He moved slightly over so I could open my locker and I waited for him to say something rather than risk sounding overeager that he was here, at my locker, after school.

“So… about Paige’s birthday tonight…”

I knew it was too good to be true, he was going to say he couldn’t make it.

And why would he even want to come? He was a senior after all, he probably had better parties to go to, better—

“What time should I pick you up?”

Oh.

He actually wanted to pick me up.

But then I remembered my parent’s talk this morning and realized I shouldn’t tempt fate.

“That’s probably not the best idea,” I mumbled.

He looked surprised, followed quickly by confused, a slight pout working its way onto his face.

It was

how cute he was.

“Why not?”

How could I say no to that face, but how could I say

“It’s just um… my parents… they… well they um, want to meet you?”

I didn’t mean for it to come out as a question, but it was hard enough stringing two syllables together around him without that sad little frown.

“You don’t want me to meet them?”

“I well… I didn’t think you’d want to” I explained lamely.

He looked slightly disappointed, and for some reason I felt totally heartless.

I'd just assumed he wouldn't want to meet them, but if he did then I was being selfish, surely they could keep it together for just

night?

"But if you want to… I mean… they'd like you to come over Friday"

He smiled slowly.

"I'd love to"

His good mood was so infectious I couldn't even bring myself to worry about dinner with the parents.

"But as for the party, Paige wants Mandy and I to meet her there early to help set up… I could try to get out of it?"

He shook his head. "It's fine, you should help your friend, I'll just meet you there"

I nodded and his eyes lingered on my face for a few moments, long enough for a blush to start, before his lips turned up into a playful half smirk and he turned away.

***

"I have

to wear"

It movies the lead always had the perfect outfit, right down to matching pumps, which if you ask me was completely unfair. They had all of Hollywood custom making

looks, while I only had the combined efforts of Mandy's closet and mine.

She chuckled and finally got off the computer, finishing whatever she'd been working on for the last ten minutes.

"It's just a birthday party Ary"

"Yeah, just a birthday party that our

will be attending"

It was true, everyone seemed to be coming, it wasn't

Michael I needed to impress.

"Contrary to what your fairytales have told you Arya, this isn't the magical ball where the Prince coming riding in on his white horse to sweep you off to a happily ever after"

"I didn't think it was," I said defensively, though really would it hurt to have a ball now and then?

Mandy pulled out and tossed me a light blue summer dress. I held it up against myself and was instantly sold, the color matched Michael's eyes perfectly.

I slipped it on with a pair of tights and the overall look wasn't bad, not movie star perfect, but not bad.

Stepping out of the bathroom I joined Mandy in front of the vanity mirror.

She was sure to get attention in her dark red dress, a color I doubt I'd ever have the confidence to pull off.

We didn't bother with any jewelry; only a dash of lip-gloss for makeup and a pair of flats each was enough, to look

good without being overdressed.

“Ready to go?” I questioned after looking at my watch.

“Yes, just one more thing”

I adjusted a bobby pin in my hair while she ran back to the computer and printed something off.

I gave her a questioning look and she smiled before handed me the paper with a flourish. “It’s your resume”

“What?”

She shrugged. “Paige said that place is hiring, and you said you need a job”

I shook my head in wonder.

“Thanks” It was times like this she really surprised me.

“No probs, lets get out of here before Paige blows up”

We walked out to her mom’s car and slid into the back seat. I still questioned the place we were going.

Not that I’d been to the bar while it was still open, but even from the outside you could see it was falling apart, the whole area was really, old warehouses and stores for lease that no one wanted to buy. But they must have worked wonders if Paige was willing to have her Sweet Sixteen there.

When we pulled up I noticed the old falling down sign had been replaced with bold white letters trimmed in silver spelling out the name, Moonbeams.

Before we even pushed open the doors I could smell the coffee, definitely a good sign, but the inside was even better.

They really had worked a miracle.

Spotlights in red and orange were arranged around the room while blue light fixtures hung from the ceiling casting a serene glow over the entire room.

The walls looked freshly painted, with posters and paintings hung up every few steps, giving the place an almost art gallery vibe. All of the mismatched chairs and couches had been pushed to the sides of the room to clear a large space in the middle in front of a built in stage that spanned the back wall.

In the corner along the wall we'd just come in was a coffee bar, which explained where the heavenly smell was coming from.

"Finally, you're here!"

Paige rushed towards us, her bright yellow dress swishing around her legs and looking striking against her newly dyed red hair.

"Didn't I tell you this place was great?" She gushed, throwing an arm around each of us in a hug.

"It's amazing," I mumbled, still in awe.

"Come on I need a hand moving all the tables to the side for the food"

No two tables were the same, either of different size or color or shape, as if each one had come from a different store,

but all had been customized with deliberate graffiti adding more to the art-deco-grunge-lounge theme.

It was awesome.

We tried to put them in some order in two rows off to the side, and only managed a very haphazard arrangement, but I liked it.

The next hour was a mess of blowing up balloons and hanging streamers off the stage while the staff carried in boxes of the food Paige had ordered and before we knew it, the first guests started to arrive.

Paige left us then, greeting all the people who were arriving and Mandy pulled me off to the side.

“Go give them your resume, before it gets too crowded”

She pushed me towards the coffee bar and I shot her a nervous look before heading over.

The guy behind the counter looked a few years older than me, with just a hint of stubble covering the lower half of his face and the always partially sleepy expression I’d come to associate with college students.

When he saw me approach he smiled cheerfully and I suddenly felt more confident. “Hi, I’m Arya Simons, my friend said you guys were hiring?”

He nodded, “bring a resume and we’ll talk”

I slid the paper across the counter, earning a raised eyebrow.

“Well then, lets get you to Stan for an interview”

He lifted up a panel at the end of the counter and motioned me inside.

“Now?”

“No time like the present”

Looking back at the party I shrugged and followed the boy to a door that blended in with the back wall.

“I’m Matt by the way,” He said over his shoulder.

The back room was brightly lit and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. When they did I noticed a older man leaning over a table sorting through a stack of papers.

“Hey Stan, we just got us a new pair of hands”

The older man, Stan, looked up from his work and stared at me, I tried not to shift or fiddle with the hem of my dress like I wanted to. I really did need a job.

“Do you know how to work a coffee machine?”

“Yes”

“How about the difference between an latte and a cappuccino?”

“A latte is espresso with steamed milk, and a cappuccino uses foamed milk”

He nodded once and looked up at Matt. “Fill up a tray”

I stopped myself from shifting around in the silence and answered a few more basic questions about coffee orders; nothing resembling a standard interview, until Matt came in balancing a tray full of cups in one hand.

He handed it over to me and I looked up at Stan. Was I supposed to name each one based on how it tasted or something? That seemed more like a task for Master Chef than a simple coffee shop-lounge-art gallery.

“Walk around the room with that”

Feeling somewhat silly I balanced the tray in one hand like Matt had done and walked a circuit around the room, it took a moment to get the balance right but after that it was easy. As I passed by Stan he lifted a cup off and I shifted the weight to compensate. Matt did the same when I walked by, taking it roughly so that the tray wobbled a bit in my hand but I managed to keep it steady.

Once I got back to my starting place I looked back at Stan.

“Good, you can start tomorrow. Come by after school”

I blinked once. Was that it?

I had the job?

Well, that was… different.

I murmured a thanks before following Matt back out to the counter where he patted me on the back before lifting the side panel of the bar up again.

“Good to have you on board Arya”

“Thanks”

I still wasn’t sure that counted as an interview.

Looking around, I noticed a lot more people had arrived, though I’d only been gone for a short time.

Pushing through the crowd I tried to locate Mandy.

While I recognized most of the people from school I didn’t really know any well enough to stop and talk.

“Ary…”

Immediately recognizing the voice I looked around trying to pinpoint where it had come from, and finally saw Mandy in the shadows by the stage slumped into a couch.

I didn’t realize until I got closer that she was blinking back tears.

Immediately concerned I sank down next to her, clearly it was not the time to be excited about my new job.

“What happened?”

He face scrunched up in anger for moment for crumpling in sadness once again, and this time a few tears did escape.

“Jeremy, he just… b-broke up with me, out of

I’ll admit, that was

what I had been expecting.

“Oh Mandy, I’m so sorry, he’s such a jerk to break up with you here”

I pulled her in for a hug and she let out a small sob.

For all her talk of looking for a back up, I knew she’d really cared about Jeremy, they’d stayed together for almost two months, a record for Mandy, and I didn’t think she would have broken up with him anytime soon.

But neither of us would have seen this coming.

What I didn’t understand was

.

Every time I’d seen them together Jeremy had looked completely infatuated, how could that have changed so quickly?

She sniffled for a few minutes more before finally sitting up on her own and pulling out some Kleenex from her purse.

“I’ll be fine,” She whispered, answering my unasked question, “It’s his loss anyway and I am

going to be upset on my friend’s birthday”

We both knew she wasn’t really alright, but this was Amanda, so she picked herself up and pretended to be anyway, and I had to admire that she could be so strong about this.

“Do I look okay?”

I nodded once; Mandy was one of those girls who could look pretty even after crying.

She took a deep breath and fluffed out her hair before strutting onto the dance floor, smile already in place, and to her credit it was only a little strained.

I stayed near the edge of the dance floor, keeping one eye on her and the other looking through the crowd for Michael.

Suddenly a pair of hands covered my eyes and my heart jumped into my throat.

“Guess who”

I let out a deep breath, recognizing the voice immediately.

“Michael”

He let go and came around to face me, grinning broadly.

“You’re good”

It was simple praise, but I flushed happily all the same.

His eyes twinkled from the overhead lights, looking almost silver as he stared at me.

“Do you want to dance?”

I nodded immediately before remembering I was supposed to be keeping a watch on Mandy, but looking onto the crowded floor, I saw her surrounded by three guys and flirting outrageously, determined as ever to bounce back.

Thinking she’d be distracted for a bit I took his hand and let myself be pulled into the crowd.

Granted it was no ball, and maybe things weren’t perfect, but it seemed well on the way to happily ever after to me.

Alone on Cloud 9 (10)

I'm back! I feel like I've been under a rock these last few weeks, but finals are over, the snow has finally melted, and I can get back to writing. Had some major writers block for this chapter so sorry if its not up to its usual standard, guess that's what happens when you take a break for almost a month; a serious lack of inspiration, my brain is still spouting out facts about cells and equations and definitions that I needed for my finals. Ugh.

Anyway, I know some people have been confused with the story so to break it down the odd chapters happen in the past and skip long periods of days just showing a glimpse of important events or introducing some major characters. The even chapters are from the present and time passes at a more normal rate, sometimes with just a day or two gap between what happened last. Hope that helps.

Vote for me in Watty Awards! I've really missed you guys.

PS. Big thanks to the fans sending in covers for this story, the one on the side was made by DayoldBlues =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 10

Remember your first love?

Go on, I know you're thinking about them now, I bet they came to mind immediately, easy as breathing. I bet you thought it would last forever, that this was it

, the person you'd sacrifice everything for, the one you probably forgave time and time again even when they'd long since stopped deserving it.

Remember?

I can see it now, that dreamy smile, the far off look in your eyes as you remember when things were perfect, how they swept you off your feet, flew you cloud 9, how you wrote their promises in your heart with permanent ink, and how every old notebook has their names scribbled in some corner.

Or maybe you're part of the other half, the scoff and deny type. You know who you are. Love doesn't exist right? It was all just a big mistake, a waste of your time, but I know you felt it, that moment when it all came crashing down, the moment that brought you where you are today. The moment your heart broke.

And all those skinned knees and bee stings seem like nothing in comparison.

. Yeah right. Words cut deeper than the sharpest knifes, words stay with you longer than any scab or swollen ankle, and words can’t be healed with a band-aid or cast.

But there

to have been something there worth liking right? You have to believe that, if for no other reason, to justify your love in the first place, to justify sleepless nights and tear stained

cheeks, and waiting by the phone for a call that never came. There had to have been something,

, to prove that you weren’t just a fool, just

.

I just didn't know. The line between deceit and reality had been blurred out of recognition, placed behind a fog of uncertainly.

. But a little part of me wanted to believe some of it had been real, because despite it all, despite everything, I wanted to look back 30 years from now and smile. I wanted to think, Michael Conner, sure, I remember him, and smile.

Was that really so much to ask?

But every time I thought of him the image that flashed across my mind was his facial expression that day. Beautiful smile turned into something ugly and unrecognizable, twisting his handsome features into a look filled with loathing and contempt.

I always wondered, what could make anyone go so far, do something so sick and petty, just for revenge?

Maybe I would have been better off if he'd been

At the very least he should have been the one that

away. But I guess that was too much to ask.

I had every reason to hate him; I

hate him.

It was just the idea of him I'd liked, the classic mistake; I'd put him on a pedestal he couldn't possibly live up to. Not that it had ever been his intention to, but I would've done

, I… no.

Something about him just tugged at me in a million different ways, and I dreaded the day I started getting used to him being back again. The second my defenses faltered even a little… I shuddered at what might happen.

This was the guy who had made me fall in love with him anew every single day. You can't just forget that, but I wanted to,

I wanted to.

I yawned widely, mourning my lack of a good nights sleep. I couldn't function without at least six hours and last night I'd barely managed a total of three. I smoothed out the wrinkles of my boat necked black shirt and fastened on a pair of large silver hoop earrings before looking at myself in the mirror.

The words seemed to come from behind me, like he was suddenly in the room, and even though the reflection in the mirror showed I was alone I looked around anyway.

Great,

.

I quickly undid the earrings and chucked them in the trash car beside my wardrobe, feeling disgusted even looking at them.

Looking back at the mirror a million insecurities drifted into my mind. I tugged on the blond strands framing my face and they suddenly seemed washed out, a dirty yellow instead of the pale blond I was used to. Even my eyes seemed to have lost their luster, though I knew I was probably just imagining it. Everything just screamed dull, plain,

And the question burning just at the back of my mind, always there, screamed louder than ever,

I wondered at the silence downstairs, for once wishing my parent's usual bickering would drift up to distract me from the thoughts. He was back and still I had no answer, if anything I wondered more, desperate to know why he still continued to taunt me with his presence and too fake smiles everyday.

I dug my hand into my jewelry box, looking for something interesting to wear, anything that stood out, that wouldn't make me feel like the helpless pathetic girl staring back at me.

A pair of peacock feather earrings met my groping fingers and I held them up dubiously. I definitely didn't buy these. And then I remembered, they were a gift from my dad years ago, he said he'd found them at the town fair and the lady behind the counter told him they were the latest in style. They'd seemed ridiculous at the time, something I'd never wear, and so they were perfect. I stuck them in and liked the way they fluttered when I moved my head. At least it was something.

I grabbed my book back and reluctantly made my way down the stairs. I should be looking forward to school, but after he

showed up there yesterday it hardly felt safe. Was there anywhere I could go that he wouldn't find me?

Walking down the stairs I hardly registered my father pacing across the floor or my mother tapping a pen against the tabletop. These were nervous habits I was used to and I didn't spare them a second thought as I reached into the cabinet for a travel mug to fill with coffee I desperately needed before heading out.

"Why didn't you tell us Michael was back?"

I froze with my hand on the doorknob and turned slowly back around. I guess I should have been expecting this conversation, but in all the drama of the last week it just hadn't occurred to me they would find out. Did it have to be today though? When I could hardly function as it was?

I shrugged, trying to keep the tension off my face and wished again for a few more hours of sleep. "Because it was no big deal, how did you find out anyway?"

"The school called"

It took a moment for the words to properly reach my mind.

. I suppose that made sense. If I'd been thinking straight I would have seen it coming. Of course they would call, the bastard just

to show his face there yesterday.

Already I could feel the signs of a headache as an awkward silence stretched between us, and this was the reason I didn't want them finding out. What could they say? What could I say? It was a delicate subject, one of those things that your try to ignore after the fact, a subject you bury in

the back garden and plant a bush of roses over to hide the evidence.

Michael being back meant revisiting those days of embarrassment and shame, of nights spent muffling tears into a pillow and coming down each morning with puffy red eyes. We'd skirted around the problem back then, they didn't ask and I didn't tell, but we both knew exactly what had happened,

.

Frankly I was surprised they'd mustered the energy to say anything this time.

"Is he bothering you?" My dad asked gruffly. The look in his eyes surprised me, they were filled with concern, but the tight lines around his eyes indicated barely suppressed anger, though it wasn't directed at me.

. But it was obvious now, an overly protective father in all his glory. I was surprisingly touched.

"I'm a big girl dad, I can take care of it," I answered with a weak smile.

His gaze still looked concerned, and I appreciated the sentiment, but we were long past the days where they could rush in and fix things, and when it came down to it he was my problem; I wanted to beat him on my own.

I doubled back and grabbed my keys off the counter before heading out to the car, gulping down a large mouthful of coffee to wake me up. I regretted it when I burned my tongue and switched to smaller sips until I felt awake enough to drive. I fiddled with the radio until a good station

came on and cranked the volume up on Apocalyptica’s I Don’t Care.

I thought to myself as it played

The trip seemed to take longer than usual, and that's when I realized I'd been driving under the speed limit. It seemed even subconsciously I didn't want to go to school, what if he was there again? Nevertheless I sped up and found myself pulling in minutes later.

Just as I reached the entrance hall the first bell rang, and while I knew that meant I only had five minutes to get to class I couldn't push my feet to move any faster. While everyone rushed to their lockers and down to class I shuffled along slowly and wearily turned the combination on my lock. It didn't open.

O

I'd come to realize life had a way of kicking you while you were down. When one thing went wrong everything else followed. I spun the dial again, making sure to hit every number perfectly. It still wouldn't budge. I let my head drop against the locker with a load clang that echoed down the now empty hall just as the second bell went off.

"Why. Won't. You. Open"

"You may not have heard it over your locker abuse, but that was the bell that just rang oh short one"

I glared at Evan, but was too tired to come up with any kind of snarky response, and a half assed insult would probably just result in another absurd nickname. He nudged me out of the way and started spinning in the combination before I could even say the numbers, opening it on the first try.

"How'd you know my combination?"

"You've had the same lock since tenth grade, I've seen you open it a thousand times"

"Stalker"

"You know it,” He said with a wide grin.

I know I should have been more annoyed, but this was Evan, he was fairly harmless, and anyway, we were late. I grabbed my textbook, shoved my bag in and slammed the door shut before it had a chance to fall back out.

We slipped into class just as the morning announcements came on saving us from a lecture from Ms. Moore and only getting a stern shake of the finger instead. Did people even do that anymore?

Evan winked at me before sauntering over to his seat and earned yet another glare when he stopped to bump fists with Greg and Kale before sliding into the desk next to Wes. Grace smiled brightly at me as I slumped down beside her; she was

a morning person. I nursed my lukewarm coffee and tuned into the announcements, the same ones that had become more and more frequent the closer we got to grad.

There was a certain buzz around the school with the end of the year only one and a half short months away. Suddenly it was

and

Remember to

and

It was suffocating in its way, and thrilling at the same time. Part of me didn't want to graduate, to leave behind my friends and the relative ease of high school. The rest of me couldn't wait to get away from my family, leave these halls and three years worth of drama behind and never look back.

The schedule for club photos for the yearbook, and a reminder for all seniors to send in photos for the graduating class slideshow were the last items to be announced, and I noted with satisfaction that ten minutes of class time had been used up. Even when I

awake, advanced physics was a cruel class to have first thing in the morning.

The rest of the day seemed to go by in slow motion. Slow motion with instant replay, because I was convinced the clocks started ticking backwards every time I happened to look away. As if my short attention span and growing frustration wasn't bad enough, I kept panicking that around every corner Michael would turn up again.

Did I mention it was raining? It was like one of those cliché scenes in a horror movie when the lights go out and the main character starts breathing heavier, and taking quiet hesitant steps, peeking around every corner for some serial killer with a butcher knife to jump out just in time to be lit up by the perfectly timed flash of lightning.

Only I felt more like an audience member sitting there chanting

, while I watched the scene over the edge of a pillow and screamed even though I knew exactly what was coming.

It was the Thursday before a long weekend, which basically made it a Friday, when exactly did Friday become the new Monday for me? Probably because I was working the late shift today, and that meant being a server, and

meant having to come out from behind my safe counter and painting a bright shiny red target on my back.

Evan threw his arm around me and slammed my locker shut just as I pulled out the last textbook I needed to take home. I only had time to give him a flat look before he started dragging me down the hall along with everyone else towards the door.

Clearly the boy had no pride. I elbowed him in the stomach as best as I could while being squished against him.

"Shut

Evan"

He lower lip stuck out in a pout and I couldn't help but compare it to a little kid who's had his crayons taken away. "

woke up on the wrong day of the week, it’s the long weekend you should be celebrating"

"Yeah? Tell the weather that"

I stopped just outside the door under the awning where all the students waiting for rides were sheltered and frowned up at the sky. It was pouring buckets, a steady sheet of rain that only left a few feet ahead visible.

"About that… can I get a ride?" I turned my attention back to Evan and caught the full blast of his pleading expression.

"Don't you have a car?"

"Well sure, but I usually just walk"

"Well…"

"Please? Pretty please?"

I chuckled slightly and nodded, its not like I was going to make him walk, but he did deserve to beg just a little for being so annoying. I held my keychain in my mouth and held my bag over my head before running out into the downpour with Evan right behind. It didn't help much though, since for the few seconds it took to open the doors we were already soaked.

"Well on the bright side, April showers bring May flowers" I gave him an exasperated look.

"It

May"

"Close enough"

I rolled my eyes without commenting and pulled out of the parking lot. "Which way?"

The neighborhood we ended up in was a monotonous row of plain grey or brown houses, but with or without the rain Evan's house with the bright red door would have stood out. In retrospect, it would have been a safe bet parking there without even having his confirmation.

"Heading to work now?"

"Not for a few hours still, I'm working the late shift"

He clapped his hands together, "Great, you can keep me company then"

Before I had a chance to refuse he'd grabbed both our bags and run out into the rain. I didn't have much choice but to follow.

"Mom, I'm home" He yelled before the door had even been fully opened.

"In the kitchen dear"

He left our backpacks by the door and walked down a hallway that I presumed led to the kitchen. After the red door I expected the inside to be just as loud, but it was actually quite the opposite. The furniture was either white or black with little splashed of color like robins egg blue throw pillows or a red tablecloth, all very modern and tasteful. Truthfully it looked like the show rooms from IKEA, but lived in. And the smell of cookies that filled the whole house was definitely new for me, I already felt more at home here than I did at my own place.

"Shelly's an interior decorator" I snapped my attention back to Evan and realized he'd come to a stop a few steps ahead of me while I'd been admiring the living room.

"You call your mom by her first name?"

"Step mom"

"How come I never knew that?"

He smiled slightly and shrugged. "You never asked"

"Sorry" I said sheepishly feeling kind of guilty.

"Don't be, it's not like I know much about your parents either"

He raised an eyebrow, as if waiting for me to volunteer some information about them, or invite him to meet them sometime, but I wasn't ready to risk that again, not after the disaster of Michael meeting my parents.

Luckily he didn't pry and we continued into a spacious kitchen where the smell of melting chocolate was so sweet and heavy I just wanted to close my eyes and drown in it.

Evan walked across to his mom and gave her a hug, and she kissed his forehead. I resisted the urge to say aww, he wasn't even embarrassed by it like most teenage boys would be.

"How was your day dear?"

"The usual, Ary just won't have me" He said with a mournful expression.

Of course that turned her attention to a very red me and I mumbled a hello while trying to send a telepathic

to Evan. If the smirk on his face was any indication he obviously knew what I was thinking.

“So you’re Arya, my son’s told me all about how his—“

“

She looked at him curiously and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Er, yes well, never mind dear. Evan, don’t just leave your guest in wet clothes.”

“Oh shoot, sorry Ary, I didn't even realize,” and without waiting for a response he started tugging me out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“Wait here, I’ll get you something of my mom’s to wear”

His room was like any boys, clothes all over the floor, notes and books spread across the desk and the bed unmade.

“Here, these should fit” I thanked him as he shut the door and got dressed quickly.

Once changed, we chucked our wet things into the dryer, and Shelly sent us off to the basement with a plate of cookies.

“So, what was your mom trying to say earlier?”

Evan looked startled and then slightly embarrassed before walking towards the TV.

“It was nothing”

“Then why’d you stop her?”

He looked sort of frazzled, which was the last thing I expected and mumbled something under his breath before throwing me a Wii remote. “Want to play Mario kart?”

He was obviously avoiding the question, but I let it slide and sat down on the couch next to him. In minutes we were completely focused on the game, and if things had been slightly awkward before they definitely weren’t now as we leaned forward on the couch trying to gain some kind of advantage. Evan fell off the couch laughing when I drove right into the abyss of rainbow road for the fourth time.

“You suck at this

bad” He said between laughs. I kicked him lightly and tried to look annoyed even though it

pretty funny.

“It’s these damn wheel remotes, I would own this track with the good old N64 remotes”

“Sure you would,” He said with a smirk.

We were having so much fun I even managed not to think about my late shift at work, and when Shelly brought down two cups of hot chocolate and told us the rain had finally let up I was completely at ease, which was why Evan’s next question, so out of the blue, caught me off guard.

“So what are you parents like?”

I froze and almost spit out the sip I’d just taken. “Umm, they’re, you know… parents?”

Ignoring his raised eyebrow I leaned further back into the couch and brought the cup closer to let the steam wash over my face.

“Really, I

would have guessed” He said sarcastically.

I shrugged apologetically but didn’t elaborate, hoping he would just get the hint and drop it.

“Can I meet them?”

This time I did slightly choke on my drink a little and coughed a few times to clear my throat. Evan of course only

looked amused rather than concerned like a normal person would.

“That’s probably not a good idea”

“Why, you don’t want me to meet them?”

. But I wasn’t going to feel guilty about that line again.

“It’s complicated”

He turned around so he was facing me and seemed to be thinking whether he should say his next words or not. I looked away not being able to meet his gaze and trying not to give anything away with my expression.

“Does this have anything to do with Michael?”

My eyes widened as they flashed back to him in alarm.

Obviously he could see the answer in my expression because he nodded and frowned slightly. My mouth felt suddenly dry and took a quick sip while getting up the courage to ask.

“Who told you?” My voice came out as a whisper and already I felt ashamed that he knew what my family was like.

“No one told me, it just always seems to come back to that jerk with you” He said sympathetically.

His tone wasn’t accusing, but it felt that way anyway. Of course he was right, it always did come back to him.

I blew out a breath and knew I had to say something since he was still waiting patiently for an answer. “My parents don’t always… get along. Michael came over once to meet

them and it didn’t go so well, and its like now that he’s back… I just keep

for him to bring it up or tell people, or…” I shook my head slightly, and then I heard the whole sorry story pouring out before I stop myself.

“I still remember how quiet it was in his car, neither of us saying anything. The whole night had been awkward, but the next day he’d gone on as if nothing had happened and never asked to meet them again. I’d been grateful at the time, but looking back I wondered why he never asked if I was okay, asked what was going on. It should have been obvious then that he just didn’t care, didn’t want to get involved. My family problems were just that,

.”

I stopped talking abruptly, realizing I’d said a lot more than planned. Going back to my old defense I closed my eyes, hoping that would be enough to make it go away. I felt my mug being eased out of the vice-like grip of my hands and the sound of it being placed on the glass coffee table beside me, and then I found myself wrapped up in an Evan hug.

I couldn’t help but laugh a little at the familiarity of it and hugged him back. Of all people I never would have pegged Evan as being the one to hear this story, but it was relief to actually tell someone. He pulled back and ruffled my hair. I slapped his hand away and stuck my tongue out at him. Already we were back to normal but something had definitely changed between us, or at least with me. This was the first time we’d had anything resembling a serious conversation and while before now I figured our sort-of friendship would be over with high school, now I was pretty sure it would last, and the thought made me smile.

“You know one day he won’t be able to hurt you anymore”

“I hope you’re right”

***

I could feel his eyes on me.

Don't ask me how I knew; it was like a sixth sense.

He was across the room, a dozen tables between us, and I'd been too busy filling orders to spare a glance up, but still, I knew.

Two years ago I thought it was amazing, how he could just walk into a room and I'd immediately know it, like a gut feeling, where you’re so attuned to the other person that they just stand out in a crowd. And it didn't matter if there were a hundred people between you, it just happened, you'd look up, and there they were, as if you'd known it all along, as if you had no doubt they’d be there when you looked up…

It used to happen all the time, but that was then, two years ago,

I wanted to be wrong, I told myself

But he was.

And I couldn't pass it off as a coincidence, because even when he caught my eye across the room he didn't look away. A faint smile played at the corner of his lips as he watched me and a moment later two of the guys at his table looked over as well, causing me to be the first to turn away.

I wearily walked out from behind the counter and took a deep breath while balancing the tray on my hand and telling myself it was stupid to be so anxious, this was no big deal; I did it all the time. Glancing up once more I stopped in my tracks for a moment.

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He was wearing a yellow shirt. He hated yellow.

I shouldn't still remember that, but I did, I remembered because I'd told him I liked it.

Maybe it was a cliché girl thing to overanalyze everything, but with Michael you really did have to. He never did anything without an ulterior motive, and though I hated to admit I remembered, he'd done this move before, I just hadn't realized it at the time.

I got through the orders without mishap and tried not to rush back to the counter. Granted, it was only for a few minutes respite while I loaded the tray but this whole evening had me on edge and I would take whatever I got. I picked up the slip of paper Charlie had left and set one cup under the espresso machine, filled another with medium roast coffee, and turned on the milk steamer. Contradictory as it seemed

was what I found relaxing.

Someone cleared their throat from the other side of the counter and my heart stopped for a second in dread, but it was only Charlie.

"Give me a heart attack why don't you" I mumbled.

He smiled uneasily and slid another slip across the counter towards me. “The Center Stage table”

Charlie and I had come up with a reference system for the tables in the room a long time ago, as if they were set up on a drama stage using combinations of center, up, down, right, and left. I raised an eyebrow at his obvious hesitation and scanned the room for the center stage table.

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I was such an idiot. Of course it was Michaels table, just like in the cafeteria two years ago he just needed to sit right in the middle. Had nothing changed? How had I failed to notice before? I suppose it wasn’t obvious just looking around the room, there wasn’t much order to the couches and tables scattered around, but still, it was so typical Michael I would have laughed if it weren't so

funny.

“Can’t you do it?”

He looked almost pained, which was far from a normal expression from Charlie and shook his head. “

asked for you specially”

“Of course he did” I sighed with resignation.

I slid my finished tray towards Charlie instead and started on the new orders. I took my time pouring in each layer and prolonged topping each one with whip cream and a sprinkling of chocolate flakes on one and caramel on another before I had to make my way over.

The boys stopped whatever conversation they were having, and as I got closer all turned to look at me.

.

“Medium half-café caramel swirl extra cream. Large café latte no foam. Large vanilla bean, double shot latte.” I recited quickly while placing each drink on the table. I flashed a quick smile and tried to make a clean getaway but Michael wasn’t having it.

“Wait up Ary, I’d like to introduce you to my friends”

That was the last thing I was expecting. His smile grew wider at my obviously skeptical expression, but I was too busy wondering why he would want me to meet his friends to care. Back in tenth grade he’d never introduced me to anyone, not even when I’d sat at his table those few times. Sure a few of them had been nice enough to make small talk, and the Brad guy I’d met after the drama show had always waved hello, but this was definitely new.

“This is Ben Harris,” He pointed to a guy whose messy blond hair fell over his brown eyes, and looked like he’d be most comfortable with a guitar in his hand, who only nodded with a faint smile on his face, “and this is Tyler Ford.” With his dark brown hair in a fohawk, leather jacket and half framed glasses Tyler had a nerdy bad boy thing going on that shouldn’t have worked but ended up looking really good. He smiled and held out his hand for me to shake.

“Umm, nice to meet you, I’m Arya” I said with an awkward half wave.

“So did you and Michael go to school together?” Tyler asked conversationally. I didn’t realize how tense I’d been until it suddenly felt like a huge weight had been lifted.

.

“Yeah… so what brings you guys to Mayfield?” I asked hesitantly since he looked like he was waiting for me to say something.

“Didn’t Mike tell you? This weekend is our Med School interviews”

“Oh, isn’t that the next town over?”

“Well yeah, but Mike wanted to stay here for a few weeks, and since my brother’s here anyway,” he shrugged.

“Wait, are you Jeremy Ford’s brother?” I asked, suddenly remembering his last name.

His face lit up in a bigger smile than before. “That’s right do you know him?”

“Uh, he used to date my friend Amanda” I said awkwardly.

He nodded in recognition “Right I liked that girl, don’t know what could have possibly made my idiot of a brother dump her” He said with a what-can-you-do grin.

“Anyway, we’re heading out tomorrow for the long weekend, but we’ll be back on Tuesday” Michael cut in with a falsely pleasant smile. Surprisingly I hadn’t even noticed he was still here, Tyler was easy to talk to.

“Well good luck to all of you, but I’ve got to get back to work” I said, directing my words towards his friends. It was really time to make my exit.

I only got a few steps before feeling a hand on my shoulder. I knew who it was immediately and tried not to react even

though everything in me was screaming to flinch away. Instead I turned around slowly and tried to look as unfazed as possible, but my eyes refused to stray from his hand on my shoulder, wishing he would drop it. His gaze followed mine and he blinked in surprise, smiling slightly before squeezing gently.

Was he amused?

Do I

you Michael?

He leaned in closer and I forced myself to stand my ground, taking this, like everything between us, as a challenge. I was all too aware of the stares we were getting and cursed him for making us the center of attention. But I couldn’t afford to make more of a scene; I needed to get out of here fast.

"So Ary, going to miss me?" He asked in a stage whisper. He smirked at me, an amused glint in his eyes.

.

Looking over his shoulder I could see that his friends were glancing back at us, and I knew they’d heard. I lowered my voice to barely above a whisper.

"Fall off a cliff and I just might," and with a falsely cheerful smile I sent a fluttering wave at his friends and turned around, but Michael couldn’t let me go without getting the last word, which I very well knew. I was just glad he kept his voice low enough for only me to hear when he whispered "Don't worry babe, I'll be back"

He turned away with a wink and I tensely made my way back to the coffee bar and mimed barfing when I was safely

behind the counter. Charlie laughed loudly from his spot behind the cash register, having caught the action, and Michael glanced back suspiciously. I gave him another bright grin, this one for real because I hardly believed my luck.

I had a whole weekend, four solid days of freedom from him. I wanted to pump my fist in the air, but that may have been just a bit overdramatic. Still, I was in a better mood than I had been all week and the rest of the shift seemed to fly by until it was already quarter to twelve. Michael's friends had left about fifteen minutes ago and he'd followed shortly after.

"Well that's the last of them, looks like we can close early" Charlie appeared beside me and grabbed the keys out of the cash register to lock up. I flipped the switch to turn off the stage and flood lights and heard the music cut off as Charlie turned off and locked the sound system.

Hauling on the ends of one of the trash bags I knotted it up and grabbed another before clumsily lifting them through the back room towards the door that led outside to the dumpsters.

I froze in the doorway when I heard the muffles of a heated argument going on and almost went back inside to get Charlie when my name was said. Instantly curious I left the bags in the doorway to keep it from slamming shut and made my way along the wall until I could make out the words.

I leaned back against the wall, knowing this was so wrong, but I couldn't help it, it was like my feet were glued to the ground, unable to move.

"I swear Michael, if you mess with her again I'll kick your ass back out of town

"

The loathing in their voice was palpable, so uncharacteristic I could hardly breathe.

"Please, you can't

me" I could hear the sneer in his voice, the arrogant and self-satisfied tone that I knew almost better than my own voice.

was the Michael I remembered from two years ago, right after the incident.

The person chuckled, soft and slow with a steady kind of maliciousness that I'd never heard from them before.

"You're so

Michael"

For a moment my heart stopped. I'd heard those words before; they were like an echo in my mind on an endless loop.

"Who do you think started the food fight? Who do you think threw the first French fry? It was

. I drove you out of town once and so help me, I'll do it again"

My heart thudded loud in my chest, because I just couldn't believe this, the words barely processes. I'd always wondered, but never, in all my guesses would I have thought—

He laughed bitterly, but I knew it was forced, I knew he was just as surprised as I was. "Just

. You have no cards left to play, do you think she'd ever trust you? Ever listen to you? I got what I wanted all along. You

"

The shuffling of feet had me pressed against the wall in fear.

I prayed,

This was

a bad idea.

"It's not over Michael. You should never have come back. I won't give you another chance to hurt her, mark my words"

The silence seemed to stretch on between them. Michael knew as well as I the threat was meant, hadn't the incident been proof of that?

But I was still confused, unsure of so much that I thought I'd known for so long. I felt like I was missing half the story, like the crucial last piece of my puzzle was missing.

Finally, a weary sigh broke the tense silence.

"Look, it's different this time Mandy" The edge had gone from his voice, replaced with a raw honesty that I wouldn't in a million years believe possible if I hadn't just heard it.

"Bullshit" She replied relentlessly.

"I'm serious, this isn't a game"

"Are you

going to stick with that story Michael? Because if I were you, I'd pick something more believable; we've all seen you,

everyone knows, everyone's just waiting for the next move"

"I'm not playing okay? It just happened, and when I get back I'll make my

, and we'll see who has more credibility. You're forgetting one thing Mandy, one crucial little thing. This is all

fault. You made the wrong choice and she paid,

you still haven't told her the truth, but

will

, so this is far from over.”

Shuffling footsteps drifted away and I leaned further back into the wall, wishing I could sink right into it while my mind was reeling with what I'd just heard.

Alone on Cloud 9 (11)

Shocking isn't it? Two chapters in one week I've been waiting to write this one for a while now so I hope you like it, even if you were one of the people who saw it coming.

The lovely banner on the side was made by safiaa56 =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 11

You know how they say don't judge a book by its cover? I never understood that. Just what exactly are you supposed to judge it by then? They say a picture's worth a thousand words. Now

makes sense. The cover is a story's first impression, a glimpse into the life of the character you're about to delve into. It gives you a basis to form the story around, to see the words as a movie in your head. Maybe a story is awesome, maybe it deserves an award, but if it has a boring cover that doesn't grab my attention right from the start, or at the very least an intriguing title, it's going back on the shelf.

That's all I'm saying.

The same thing applies to people, if you know what to look for. I'm not saying you can't change your mind, or that a

judgment based on appearance should be the determining factor in whether or how you interact with a person; after all, everyone deserves a chance to prove you wrong, but you need something to go on. Sometimes that gut instinct is right. Sometimes getting in too deep clouds your judgment, lets you conveniently forget the flaws, the frayed edges and peeling lamination or cracks down the spine. But they still exist; they still mar the surface if you just know where to look.

What I'm saying is, I was right about Paige Summers all along.

I was surprised at the speed of this schools' gossip mill. It was like one quick strike of steel against flint, sparks flew out in every direction catching on the tongue of any student ready to spread the news and feed an ever-growing flame.

Even before the first period bell had gone off, everyone knew.

I tried not to listen as I pulled my biology textbook out of my locker and slammed it shut behind me, but it was pretty hard not to notice when the curious gazes started being directed at me.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. After her birthday party, Paige had earned a little time in the limelight, but not content with just fifteen minutes of fame, she'd been determined to steal the whole show.

Suddenly she'd have to talk louder, laugh harder, as if everyone in the school was hanging on her every word. Every conversation required expressive gestures and even little annoyances had to be announced like a theatrical production of righteous indignation so the whole student body could benefit. Mandy found her amusing and had

always attracted quite a bit of attention anyway having dated her way through most of the tenth grade boys, I mostly found it embarrassing. Either way, it explained why this piece of news was blown way out of proportion.

Mayfield was a small enough town that most people knew your business as it was, I preferred to keep what little things I could private rather than all but give a play by play of my day on the morning announcements.

And much as I wanted to pretend I was above it, I hated the way other people looked at us. Some seemed intimidated, others bored or annoyed, some even seemed mildly interested or downright amused, either way I hated losing the ability to walk down a hallway without a few heads turning in my direction.

I must have gotten used to it over the days though, because the today’s scandal had all that embarrassment rushing back as everyone turned to look at one of Paige Summers best friends.

, I wanted to shout at them. And if

had it this bad I couldn't even image what Wes must be going through.

Cheating was such a dirty thing, so low and inconsiderate, so unbelievable selfish. It was one of the things I would never understand.

"Hey, you're friends with Paige right? Why'd she do it?" A girl I hadn't seen around before was standing in front of me, and it was obvious by the other three girls huddled close pretending not to listen, that she'd been chosen to come over here to ask the question they were all dying to know the answer to.

"I don't know" I replied blandly and pushed past her. Apparently friendship didn't count for much since I was one of the last to know, but maybe she'd already guessed I wouldn't take her side.

Even if I

known, I wouldn't have told these vultures. All I knew was that it had happened at the movies. I knew it had to have been Cinezone, it was the only theatre it town, which of course meant at any given time there were always at least a few people from school there. No wonder word had gotten around so fast. The gossip around here was like a game of telephone, who knows what even one innocent comment would turn into by the end of the day?

Still, even without my help everyone knew the truth of what had really happened, there had been plenty of eye witnesses, and despite trying to ignore it, by the time I made it to class I already knew that it all started unraveling when Paige made a big scene at the concessions counter about the kind of candy he'd got her.

The second bell rang just as I slid into my seat beside Mandy and she gave me a tense smile, confirming what I'd already guessed. Paige had already told her everything, probably even the guy she’d cheated

, which didn't surprise me since she'd always been closer to Mandy then me. I guess I'd never fully trusted her, which was obviously warranted.

"So what was her excuse?" I asked when Ms. Daniels was facing the board.

She sighed heavily and her face scrunched up in pity and disgust. "She said she never meant to let it go so far"

I tried to hide my disbelief, but really, that was it? Not

, not,

, no, just

. That was sick.

Every girl in class had their cell phones hidden under their desks and were furiously texting away and the guys were no better, though for them it was more about if Paige was as easy lay.

Most of the class was spent whispering about what had happened whenever Ms. Daniels wasn't looking, and by the end of class I knew that after her little diva fit Paige had ignored him for the rest of the night, texting her friends and refusing to accept his apology.

I shoved my notebook into my bag after looking regretfully at the mere paragraph of notes I'd written. Amanda was still standing next to me, biting her lip slightly, a new nervous habit she'd developed. I wondered why she was waiting for me since we didn't have our next class together and hers was on the other end of school.

We walked out of class and were halfway down the hall when she turned tilted her head towards me. "Look, I know how you feel about cheaters, but Paige is in my next class and even though what she did was so wrong she's not going to really have anyone and…"

I could see where this was going. "It's fine Mandy, do what you have to do"

She smiled apologetically, but the relief in her features was obvious as she turned down the hall before the stairs. I felt

uneasy that Mandy was still speaking to Paige, but it wasn't my place to tell her who to be friends with, and I guess as long as I didn't have to be around her it wasn't a huge deal.

I saw Wes on the way to class. Truthfully I was surprised he'd even come in today knowing how it would be, which really said a lot and somehow made me like him even more. He had his hands in his pockets and his head down, letting a curtain of brown hair cover his eyes while ignoring the heads that turned his way, the nudges that rippled through the crowd as he passed, the pointed fingers tracing his steps down the hall.

I wanted so badly to go up to him, to say something, but I wasn't exactly on a conversation basis with the guy. If I was lucky I might be able to stutter out an

.

And anyway, it was none of my business. It wasn't anyone’s, and yet they all knew, watched him like a TV sitcom, talked about him like he was a piece in a celebrity gossip magazine. Wasn't it bad enough he got cheated on without the whole school knowing all the details?

In a way Paige had dug her own hole. She'd bragged about how awesome her boyfriend was almost constantly after her birthday. How many times had she gushed about the flowers he gave her, the texts he'd sent, the places he'd taken her, to every listening ear? So to turn around now and say he was the one at fault was the very worst thing to do. There were definitely no sympathy votes coming her way.

For once I was grateful to Mrs. Jenkins for forcing us all to read lines, and even though I really disliked

at least it was a break from all the drama of the day.

By the time I walked into the cafeteria I already felt exhausted, having been practically accosted three more times on the way down for details, and now despite my best intentions, I had the whole story.

After walking out fifteen minutes before the movie ended, he'd gone to look for her and found them going at it against the side of the building.

.

As the movie ended and everyone came flooding out the doors they'd seen her apologizing profusely while trying to pull her dress back down; the scene pretty much spoke for itself. He didn't even react. It must have been the shock of it, but he didn't get upset or angry, just slumped his shoulders and said two words.

She'd said it was just over a month, and then he'd left with nothing but a disgusted look, which only made people stand up for him even more.

But the big question was

. Who was the guy? Because surprisingly, even with his pants down, he'd managed to get away unrecognized and Wes refused to say a word about it. I couldn't help but admire that.

Michael waved me over to his table and even though my stomach flipped at the sight of him I still couldn't stop thinking about everything I'd heard throughout the day. Mandy was already sitting there and I took a seat between them.

"Can you believe all this?" Michael asked me with a laugh, gesturing to all the huddled groups of students around the

cafeteria. I didn't really get what he found so funny, it only seemed pathetic to me.

"It's all anyone's talking about" I said back with a sigh.

"I know, why would they all waste their time talking about some nobody?" He asked with a roll of the eyes.

"Mike!" I punched him in the shoulder lightly and he tried to look apologetic but it was ruined by the slight grin on his face. "He's not just some

, and what happened was really awful, especially the way everyone's talking about it"

He was about to reply back when almost at once the entire cafeteria went silent. It was like someone had hit a mute button, and there could be only one reason.

I turned with everyone else to look at the doors and saw Wes standing there.

You know when you're throwing someone a surprise party? All the lights are out and everyone is waiting behind some piece of furniture until the lights flip on so they can jump out and yell

and there's a buzzing silence where everyone is fidgeting around trying to stay hidden or hushing their neighbor.

This was just like that, everyone waiting for someone else to break the silence, nudging their friends to stop whispering. Wes looked around at everyone staring at him and walked calmly to his table as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Finally cough broke the silence, and gradually people went back to their conversations, trying not to be obvious about

the fact that they'd just been talking about him or Paige, who still hadn't made an appearance in the cafeteria.

Michael started talking about a soccer game he'd watched last night, and I tried to seem interested, but I couldn't seem to pull my eyes away from Wes. He'd taken a seat between Evan and a guy with curly blond hair, and the only way to describe his expression was defeated as he slumped lower in the chair. The guys all seemed to be trying to make jokes, punching him in the shoulder and messing up his hair to get a reaction, but he didn't even seem to notice.

"Ary? Is everything alright?" I snapped my attention back to Mike and he gave me a puzzled smile and placed his hand over mine. Yesterday I would probably be hyperventilating at the action, small though it was, but today I just felt this unexplainable guilt that I had no reason for feeling. And something about the whole situation bugged me, like an itch I couldn't reach, he had to be feeling

, why wasn't he venting? Raging on her,

.

He squeezed my hand and I remembered I still hadn't replied. "Oh, everything's fine, I feel really exhausted today" I mumbled. I mustered up a smile and he just watched me for a moment before mirroring the action.

"If you say so"

I shifted the food in my plate around and took a few bites, not really tasting anything before just giving up.

"Ready to go Mandy?"

She broke off flirting with the guy beside her and stood up beside me without sparing him a second glance. I tried not to smile at his offended expression; it was such an Amanda thing to do.

We started to walk out of the cafeteria together, and like always the boys table in the corner erupted into catcalls and laughter. I couldn't help but smile and shake my head at their antics. Boys will be boys I guess.

Mandy grinned at them, still not tiring of the attention and blatantly checked them out, probably looking for any with boyfriend potential. She'd already gone through two boys in the short time since her breakup, claiming each just wasn't interesting.

I tried to duck my head down as usual, but instead caught Evan's smirking face. He waved at me enthusiastically and mimed picking up a phone while mouthing 'call me' obviously enough for the whole table to turn and see my reaction. Normally I would have rolled my eyes and turned away, but then I noticed Wes looking up at the exchange with that same empty look he'd had all lunch and changed my mind. I redirected our steps towards their table making them call out even more, and put my hand on Evan's shoulder.

"Sorry Evs, you're just not my type" Wes let out a surprised laugh beside him and I tried not to let my face heat up when he smiled at me. I turned away with Mandy chuckling beside me to a collective

from the table as they all made fun of his failed attempt.

Boys.

We walked around the halls for a bit and Mandy told me that Paige hadn't shown up at lunch because she'd been writing a make-up test. Of course everyone in the cafeteria had thought it was because she was too ashamed to show her face there, clearly they didn't know Paige like we did. Humiliated or not she'd never back down, and had no doubt walked around school with her head held high all day, acting for all the world like she

been caught banging some guy right out where anyone could see.

The bell rang and I headed off to social. It wasn't as awkward as I would have thought, since the feverish gossip of the day and dulled down to a slow trickle now that everyone was fully caught up.

Wes walked in at the last minute and kept his head down as he headed for a seat at the very back. Evan was trailing a few steps behind and stopped in front of my desk with a mournful expression.

"Just rip my heart out why don't you"

I muffled a laugh and he stuck his tongue out at me, whispering, "At least you made him laugh," before following his friend to the back.

Of course after that

had a smile on my face all class and didn't even mind Mr. Andrews droning on about whatever we were supposed to be learning today. I'd really have my work cut out for me when finals rolled around.

I left quickly even though I wanted to hang back and maybe try to stammer out my

to Wes, but today I had drama instead of French for the last block and we were presenting our monologues.

Even with the play behind us, Mr. Fitz was in his usual state of mania, ready to pull his hair out because Shane had forgotten to switch off the house lights when he'd gone to set up the spotlight for the stage.

I checked the list to see when I was presenting and took a place in the audience. When the person before me went up I took a place in the wings and looked over the script once more making sure I was ready. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, I had thought it would be a challenge, but now I was worried about trying to portray something I’d never gone through before.

I didn't have much time to panic though, because just then the spotlight blacked out and the clapping started I had to make my way on stage in the dark, only waiting a moment before the light faded back in.

"Everyone has that one guy.The one who broke your heart, the one who got away, the one you can't decide if you regret, the one you fell head over heels, completely, madly in love with.

That's you.

It

comes back to you.

No matter where I go, who I'm with, it's always you I see in those sideways looks, those lopsided grins. I could go a million miles away, meet a hundred people, but still, I’d see you in all of them.

How did you do that?

How did you have that effect on me when I had so little on you?

You just stand there, with your perfect smile like nothing gets to you, and I just want to break that pretty picture

. You think you've won, always being the one who cares less, but look at you; you're just a lifeless shell.

Fine, you'll never get hurt, but you'll never be happy either, and maybe

the one that broke, but when it's your turn, you with that glass heart that doesn't seem to beat, well, you'll just

.

And then

have that one girl. The one who broke

heart, the one that got away… but for what it's worth, you win, for now"

I lowered my head and waited for the lights to go out as the applause rang out and took shaky steps off the stage. Like any performance I felt like I was about to collapse afterward. And then the exhilaration hit, like a sudden shot of adrenaline. This was what I loved. It didn't matter whether I was good or bad, if I'd nailed it or made a complete fool or myself, just being on stage, that was enough.

I waited in the wings for the giddy feeling to wear off before tiptoeing back to the audience and sliding in next to Charlie. He gave me a silent thumbs up and we watched the rest of

the performances, the perfect way to unwind after a long day in my opinion. The final bell rang, but we all waited for Jane to finish her piece before collecting our bags and piling out of the classroom.

Charlie waved goodbye and headed down the hall towards his locker while I went the other direction to mine. The one upside to getting out of class a few minutes late was that the halls were already half cleared. I took my time and only remembered when I walked past the office that I hadn't seen today's paper.

Apparently I wasn't the only one. With all the gossip of the day it seemed no one had bothered with the

since the stack was still untouched. I picked one up and leaned back against the wall, flipping to my favorite section. As I'd expected there were a few mentions of Paige cheating from the people who'd managed to send in a message before the deadline. And then—

.

I felt my hands go slack and heard the slap of the paper as it hit the ground.

.

I looked down, not believing what I'd just read, but there it was, the proof right there for everyone to see, except

.

I never would have guessed, never would have known if I hadn't just seen it myself, and suddenly his calmness all day made sense. He'd gotten it out the best way he knew how. I almost wanted to laugh. All day people had been grasping

out for gossip when the best secret of all had been right here all along.

Alone on Cloud 9 (12)

So for those of you who didn’t get it or were overanalyzing it, I wasn’t trying to trick you, Wes is really Shy guy, mostly you were supposed to get that Arya’s known about it for a long time.

Sorry if this is a slow chapter, it's really more of a filler.

The banner on the side was made by cahlypso!

P.S. The three little quotes used in this chapter are from Sarah Dessen’s the Truth about Forever.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 12

I slipped out of the house early and let the cool early morning breeze wash over my face. The first buds were starting to appear on the sparsely leafed branches, and the few that had opened lent soft bursts of perfume to the air that were there one moment and gone the next.

Here I was, on a Friday morning with no school, Michael free, and somehow up before the sun had even cleared the horizon. Any rational person would still be under their covers fast asleep.

It's not like

could have slept though, not with last night’s argument still ringing in my head. I headed down the driveway past my car and let my feet pound over the cement in slow easy strides.

It

a good time to go for a walk, but if the deserted sidewalks were any indication, I was the only one to have that sentiment. I pulled my cell phone out to look at the time and let out a sigh.

. It was just past five.

It was quiet out, so quiet that all I was left with were my thoughts, and I'd had enough of those as I’d tossed and turned all night.

It felt like the ground had suddenly given way beneath me, or like when you're on a rollercoaster and the car pauses at the highest point before suddenly dropping down, leaving your breath at the top.

I was in free fall.

.

It had seemed like some kind of dream, or maybe a caffeine induced hallucination, but not real, because it just didn't make any sense.

I took a right at the end of the block and held tightly onto the book in my left hand. Not that I planned on reading it, the effort seemed futile, but there was some inherent reassurance in just feeling the weight of it in my hands, a ghost of the comfort it had once brought.

It probably looked silly; where most would have a leash in hand and an excited dog pulling them along I was taking a book along for my walk, but there wasn’t anyone around to see.

I picked up my pace and veered off onto the worn dirt path behind the houses, concentrating on the steady

of my steps, and strained my ears for the soft whistle of the wind through the branches and the faint chirping of birds in the distance; anything but the words ping-ponging across my mind.

I don't remember how long I'd even stayed out there, sitting down on the dusty concrete with my back against the cold metal of the dumpster. All I know is that's where Charlie found me. It had felt like a lifetime, but I knew it was only minutes after the second set of footsteps had stopped echoing in the stale night air.

Of course I’d called Grace as soon as I got home and told her all about it, blurting out the story in something of a daze, but she’d been just as stumped as I was. And though I'd tried to avoid the memories for years, I found myself looking back, trying to make sense of the moment in the cafeteria when all hell had broken loose, apparently because of Mandy.

, my old best friend, who hadn't come after me that morning even though tons of students I didn’t know, had. Mandy, who refused to meet my eyes after that day, didn't acknowledge that we had ever been friends or even knew each other, who wasn't there when I needed her the most. Mandy, who was now a complete stranger to me…

Nothing made sense anymore.

And that was the worst part, because I wanted so badly to be over all this drama, and I should have been. I had

I was. Instead it was like my two years of progress had been wiped out. Like even though I'd meant to finish the story, there was still a bookmark stuck in place with dozens of blank pages left behind waiting for me to finish, to fill this story out to the bitter end. But I didn't want to, because I already knew how the story ended, like I'd taken a peek at the last page, and it wasn't pretty.

There had been enough lose ends to begin with, but Michael actually being here again seemed to fray the edges of my tenuous hold even more.

I dropped down onto the bench along the side of the path I'd been walking down. It didn't offer much of a view, but at least there was enough distance from the row of houses in front of me that no one could look out their windows and recognize me.

I brought my legs up and tucked them under my chin before absently flipping through the book I'd brought. The pages split open to passages I'd read countless times in the dead of night, to familiar words that resonated in my head like they were my own because I knew them so well. My eyes darted over the sentences, instantly recalling the scene to mind, pulling me into the story, back to when I'd had such high hopes and innocent dreams, back to when the lives on the pages felt more real than my own.

So was that it? Was I one of those people, doomed to never get it done and over with? Because there had to be a way,

way to just be… better, okay with it, to forget and move on.

I wished there was a fast-forward, so I could skip over the struggle and be at the point where it

, really and truly didn’t matter anymore. Or hell, even just a

, on the off chance that he would change is mind and not come back. Because that’s what it all came down to. If he hadn’t come back I could have just gone on forgetting his existence, pretending it had never happened, or at least that it didn’t bother me. But instead he was here, and I had to face those problems all over again, everyday, like the remote was stuck on instant replay.

Maybe the universe recruited Michael Conner I thought bitterly, he was the contrast to everything I’d ever believed about

kind of love. You know, the kind of love in movies and fairytales where you sacrifice everything to reach the stars for a chance at happily ever after, when in reality it’s just a soap bubble you can only ever brush your fingers against; too fragile to hold onto.

Was that possible, to just get used to it? Because if it was, it seemed to me like it should have happened by now instead of feeling so raw and new and like it was just yesterday.

I slapped the book closed and pulled myself up before the bitterness grew too strong, but I wasn’t ready to turn back home yet like I usually did, and suddenly I wondered where this path ended up. Funny, I’d walked it a hundred times and never gotten past this bench. Like so much else lately it seemed I was stuck in the same ruts, and while it was a small thing, at least it was one thing I could do something about.

Heading off further down the path I shrugged off my sweater. The sun was rising fast now and the day seemed to get brighter with every few feet of the trail I put behind me. Far off I could faintly hear the sounds of the roused town stirring to life.

After walking for a while the sounds became more pronounced, and just as I rounded a bend in the path houses came into view and the rumble of engines starting could be heard.

Soon enough, the smooth dirt path changed to rough gravel beneath my feet and I came out at the apex of a little cul-de-sac. I didn't recognize the area, but I knew from the homes around me I was in the cheaper housing district of town.

Even though I'd reached my goal I kept walking. Two children ran out of a house laughing in the carefree manner only kids can achieve, with their mother chasing close behind. Somewhere out of site a lawnmower roared to life before dulling to a steady thrum and the smell of fresh cut grass filled the air.

As I neared the end of the crescent a bleary-eyed college student dragged his feet down the driveway towards the idling car that honked twice trying to get him to hurry up. The sounds blended together in a kind of chaotic brilliance I'd seldom appreciated and found oddly comforting.

Following the sidewalk around the corner to a row of houses facing the road, the melody changed to the

of heels along the pavement and a steady

of a basketball against the concrete. I found the source of the noise across the street just as the boy, facing away from

me, tossed the ball into the air, and froze in my steps in sync with the

as it sunk through the net.

It seemed obvious now that Wes would live in this part of town, though it had never really occurred to me even after we'd talked at the Diner. To think I'd find

at the end of my walking trail, to think he'd been here all along.

I tried not to be

completely obvious about checking him out, but seriously who wouldn't? The boy wasn't even wearing a shirt, really he was asking for it. He was all lean muscle, the kind that came naturally from a lot of time spent outdoors or on the track. His muscles flexed as he dribbled the ball and set up another shot, and now I

had to try not to be one of those swooning teenage girls, but it was a pretty close call.

Reminding myself to breathe, I dragged my feet forward. Much as I wanted to stand on the sidelines and creepily stare at him all day my mind blared an insistent warning that it might not be such a good idea.

The smart thing to do here was just to turn around and go back and maybe relieve the fantasy—

… but I stupidly kept walking forward even as I felt my face heating up at the stupid swooning girl thoughts in my head.

Just as I convinced myself how stalker-ish this could be he looked up, of course. I wondered frantically if it was too late

to pretend I hadn’t seen him, or if maybe he wouldn’t recognize me, but that was pretty much a lost cause when he lifted his free hand in a slight wave.

I had no choice but to cross the road and walk over, not that I was dreading it or anything, but I’m not sure how much I trusted myself around a very cute and very shirtless Wes. I stopped with plenty of room between us, for my own sanity, but then he walked a few steps closer like he was meeting my half way and then I had the added worry he would hear my rapidly pounding heart.

“Hey Arya” He said with a hesitant smile.

I only nodded back since my mouth suddenly felt too dry to speak, and anyway I was busy wondering where I should look. There was no way I could look at his face without blushing and looking any further down was out of the question for obvious reasons. I eventually settled for the basketball hoop just past his right ear.

He cleared his throat and my eyes automatically met his, which of course made me forget how to string two syllables together. I bit the inside of my cheek and tried to focus on the slight pain of it to keep myself from blushing while he raised a hand to smooth out his hair.

He crossed his arms over his chest, and unlike most guys, who would probably do it to draw attention, he seemed more embarrassed than anything else and like he was trying to subtly cover himself up, which of course I found

endearing.

The silence was getting to be too much and I knew I had to say something, since it didn’t look like he would be jumping

in anytime soon, and the waiting was more of a painful agony than any idiotic thing I could possibly say.

“So… you play basketball?” I finally asked.

Of course as soon as the words were out I felt stupid for pointing out the obvious, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances, and when he glanced back at the net and smiled faintly it was with noticeable relief at having something to talk about.

“Well, I guess if shooting hoops on my driveway counts”

“Oh, why don’t you play on the school’s team?”

He shrugged casually and I tried desperately not to notice how the simple action accented everything he was trying to cover up.

“’Cause then I’d have nothing to do for fun”

“But wouldn’t playing on the team

fun?”

He took a moment before answering, like he was really thinking about the answer. “I guess at first it would, but then it gets to be all about the competition, and well, this probably sounds stupid but I just like to play for me, not because other people are watching”

I smiled and walked around him to pick up the ball he’d abandoned on the grass and leaving my book and sweater in it’s place. I’d just needed to put a little distance between us; my inner swooning girl was difficult to tame. I rolled it around in my hands, feeling the rough rubber and smooth

ribbing with my fingers and bounced it against the ground once.

I looked up to see him watching me with an expression I couldn’t read, but those sparkling sea green eyes made my knees weak just the same.

“That’s not stupid,” I murmured just loud enough for him to hear before turning back to the net and tossing the ball up.

In the books this is the part where the ball makes it into the net with a perfect

that is completely impressive.

In reality I hadn’t picked up a basketball since our required gym class in tenth grade and even then I’d been lucky at best, so of course it wasn’t surprising when the ball hit the edge of the ring and rebounded back, forcing me to duck to avoid being hit and Wes to unsuccessfully smother a laughing fit, which was so

embarrassing. It also didn’t help the shirtless situation, but at least I had a legitimate reason to be red in the face this time.

He finally stopped long enough to grin at me and say “nice” with, in my opinion, an unnecessary amount of amusement.

“Shut up”

He was still chuckling lightly as he walked down the street to where it had rolled and made his way back. I took a step to the side thinking he was going to ‘show me how it’s done’ in typical male fashion, but instead he tossed it at me, and when I automatically reached out to catch it, he nodded to the net with an obvious smirk on his face.

“Try again”

“Yeah right”

I tried pushing it back into his hands but he only moved them out of the way, and well, too much tanned muscle to focus. It was quite the dilemma really, either I’d embarrass myself staring at him or embarrass myself missing the shot. I

have just run when I had the chance, instead I had to turn and face the net. I raised my hands up in the stance they always taught us and had a strong urge to close my eyes, but my aim was bad enough as is.

“Wait”

I looked over to see Wes shaking his head, smirk widening over whatever I was doing wrong. Probably everything.

“You can’t keep your legs clamped together like that, put them shoulder length apart, and tuck your elbow in”

I didn’t see how that would help, but I did as he said and made a shot. As I expected it missed, falling just short of the rim, and I couldn’t help but glare at the offending orange ball as it bounced down towards the road.

When it was clear I wasn’t about to go get it Wes rolled his eyes and jogged after it.

“You need to follow through with the shot,” He said before passing it back to me.

“That’s what all my gym teachers said too, but no one tells you

to follow through," I argued hoping I wasn't sounding too whiny. I don't know what had possessed me to try a shot in the first place and now he was enjoying this too much to let it go. If he was wearing a shirt I'd be really annoyed at him right now.

"This is how you follow through" He took back the ball and made a perfect shot, catching it as it fell from the hoop and looking back expectantly as if I was supposed to have had some kind of epiphany.

I couldn't possibly be expected to watch how he was shooting the ball when there were so many other, more interesting, things to look at. But I couldn't very well tell him that either.

"I did that," I said flatly. He just raised an eyebrow, so with a sigh I gave a half-hearted throw trying to mimic his actions and watched it fall short once more.

"You didn't follow through again"

I was ready to start in on an annoyed rant, but only got as far as an exasperated "Wes—" before he was suddenly standing behind me. Like

behind me, and then his hand was on my elbow guiding my arm up in slow motion to show me how to

and I'm pretty sure he was also trying to explain but his other arm was around me moving

other hand to brace the ball, and I was too busy trying not to hyperventilate while my mind wondered how the hell I'd managed to get into this situation to focus on what he was saying.

All right, embarrassment aside, I

totally digging the feel of his arms around me, but I was at a serious risk of melting faster than the Wicked Witch of the West ever did. And can I say it was

unfair that he seemed to be totally unaffected?

Before I'd fully caught up on what was happening the ball was out of my hands and by some coincidental magnetic pull, actually made it into the net. I felt my jaw drop and a startled laugh left my mouth. Turning around, I

my intention was to put my hand up for a high five, but I'd underestimated how close he was and well, it suddenly felt a whole lot warmer outside.

We just stared at each other for a moment, and in the movies this is part where the main characters spontaneously start making out and admit they're madly in love, but well, this was reality and we all know how

goes.

For just a second though it really

seem like he wanted to kiss me—and I totally wouldn't have objected even if I

sworn off boys, but the moment was gone as fast as it came and then he was smiling and chasing after the ball like nothing had happened.

More than likely, it was just my inner swooning girl that had conjured the fantasy, and I forcefully had to remind myself, though I'd conveniently managed to forget it all this time,

that he liked someone else. My one time best friend no less… but he did seem to like me a little too. It

possible, after all I'd crushed on

somewhat when I was head over heels for Michael, so I might have a chance. If I wanted one, which I

wasn't ready for right now… I think… no, I had to get this Michael stuff sorted first, for real, before getting involved with another guy. All we could be right now was friends.

When he came back it was obvious the lighthearted atmosphere had changed and we stood facing each other awkwardly like when I'd first shown up.

"Well… I should get going, I have work at nine"

"Oh, all right" He said with a vigorous nod, not looking me in the eye.

Not knowing what else to say, and a little bummed that things were suddenly weird between us again, I turned to pick up my stuff from the grass and started walking away. I'd only gotten across the road when I heard him call my name.

"Hey Ary" I half turned to look back and saw a faint smirk on his face. "Drop by again sometime, I'll give you another lesson"

I could feel myself smiling and nodding back even though there was no way I was making a fool of myself playing basketball again. Still, he'd asked me to come back, and it may have been just my imagination, but his cheeks had looked a little red when he said it.

***

I rushed through the door ten minutes late for my shift and caught Charlie shaking his head at me as I ran through the back door. I skidded to a halt in front of Stan and gave him an apologetic smile as he stood with his arms crossed.

“You’re late Simons”

“I know, I’m sorry, I got caught up,” I said while moving around him pull my apron off the hook and tie it on.

With an exasperated sigh he settled into the desk in the corner and pulled the stack of mail waiting there towards him. I’d worked with Stan long enough to know he wasn’t actually mad; it was mostly for appearances.

We didn’t open for another five minutes but the morning shift was always busy with everyone who stopped by for a morning dose of caffeine to get through the day. I rushed back out the door to the main room and flipped on all the coffee machines lining the back wall.

“You know for a minute there I was worried you were going to leave me all alone to deal with the morning zombies”

“And miss out on all the cranky customers? I wouldn’t dream of it” I replied back with a grin. I checked the clock and motioned for Charlie to go hit the music while I filled the milk steamer and replaced an empty syrup bottle.

“Opening the doors,” He shouted from the other side of the room.

I rushed to open a new package of medium sized navy blue paper cups with the Moonbeams logo in curly gray writing

and stacked them next to the plastic screen diving my workspace from the cash register.

A buzz of murmuring voices filled the room and filtered through the lyrics of Taylor Swift’s

coming through the speakers—country music was only allowed in the morning.

A jagged line of customers filed in with Charlie in the lead. He slid behind the counter and took the first order, writing the instructions on the side of the cup and sliding it down towards me. We fell into our usual easy routine and pretty soon I tuned everything out except the

and

of the machines and

of the cash register.

My peace was soon shattered though with a loud laugh, pitched to carry down the line, that announced the arrival of none other than Paige Summers. It figured that just when I got a break from Michael,

had to come in to fill the daily quota of annoyance.

“Morning Charles” She greeted haughtily, not even having the courtesy to look up from her rapid texting while placing her order. Not to be mean or anything but with Mandy hovering just behind her I didn’t know who she could be IM-ing so raptly; she was hardly the most well liked student at Westover.

Charlie caught my eye and mouthed

as he slid the cup down towards me. I stifled a laugh and turned around to place it under the espresso machine and measured out the white chocolate powder.

“

Arya, what do you think about Michael being here for graduation?”

My arm jerked and I just barely pulled my other hand out of the way to avoid getting burned with the freshly steamed milk.

My heart sunk at the thought, and I knew that had been Paige’s intention all along, but I wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction of admitting I hadn’t known.

I shrugged casually and squeezed out the whip cream topping with a little more force than necessary before carefully sliding the white chocolate mocha across with a lid.

“I don’t see how it affects

, but I suspect it will be quite boring” I said with a bland smile. She rolled her eyes and picked up her drink delicately while I wiped away the spilled milk.

“Hurry up Mandy” She ordered breezily.

My eyes darted up and for a moment our eyes met before her gaze dropped to the counter top and she shifted from foot to foot in the hesitancy that had become characteristic for her these days. For some reason I’d expected her to look different after threatening Michael last night, but then, I didn’t recognize the girl standing in front of me as the Amanda I’d once known either. She was so different, so… deflated almost.

“Hey”

I blinked in surprise, not sure if I’d actually heard or just imaged the quiet greeting, just above a whisper, from the girl who hadn’t talked to me in two years. Then she glanced up, just for a second, and I had to swallow back a sudden lump in my throat when I noticed her biting her lip in that old nervous habit of hers.

Even after all this time, all I wanted to blurt out was

But instead I mumbled a quick ‘hey’ back and picked up her cup to fill the order.

When I turned back the tension in the air was almost palpably thick, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, she met my gaze with an intense stare and we just stood there with this gaping chasm between us filled with a thousand unspoken thoughts.

Her name was called impatiently from across the room and the moment was broken like we’d all just been on pause and Paige had hit the play button. Amanda fit the lid over her drink and I couldn’t help but noticing her hand tremble just slightly. She glanced back at me once before making her way over to their usual table near the stage and I plastered on a smile for the next customer.

Things calmed down soon after and I found my eyes constantly drawn towards them. Paige talking emphatically and gesturing madly with her hands while Mandy bobbed her head along, offered weak smiles and ran a finger around and around the rim of her cup. Who was that lifeless girl?

Seeing her sitting so meekly I tried to conjure up the expression that would have been on her face as she was calling Michael out on all his games with a fire that was all

but extinguished lately, and I just couldn’t. In all the time we’d been friends I had never seen even close to that side of her, or

side of her for that matter. She’d only ever been less than self assured after a breakup, and even those moments were short lived; so to say that I was confused was an understatement.

Her confidence seemed to fade by the day ever since Michael arrived. She didn’t even seem interested in boys anymore, and based on the Mandy I’d known, that was a sure sign something was wrong.

No, I didn’t recognize the girl sitting across the room anymore and it made me wonder if I’d ever known her at all.

Alone on Cloud 9 (13)

So inspiration finally struck in the form of my dream car, the beautiful 2010 Camero, which everyone seems to have since I've seen at least one driving past for the last three days, though my love lies in the synergy green version.

PS. Just so I don't confuse anyone later, the legal drinking age in Alberta is 18.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 13

There's something I find so calming about a new book, more specifically, the new book smell.

I just have to hold it up to my face and let the pages flip through my hands for that fresh, hot-off-the-press aroma, and suddenly nothing seems so bad. For weeks after I'd be too afraid to let so much as a scratch mar the surface. No bent corners, no fraying edges, pages perfectly flat against each other, and a completely straight spine. I'd treat that new book like some kind of antique, like if I handled it too roughly it would fall apart in my hands.

I'd wince at the first inevitable crease down the spine; mourn the first watery brown drop of a coffee stain on the pristine surface. And the rule was no hardcover books ever,

I hated those dust jackets and how easily and quickly they got torn and bent out of shape, destroying the whole beauty of the cover page until you were forced to take it off and be left with a bland solid casing.

Books weren't

something to be read and tossed aside; they made up a work of art on a bookshelf, a window into the life of a stranger, a friend who was always there for you. Some people might call it weird, crazy, obsessive… but I called it comfort.

While I was reading I could be anywhere and anyone. While reading I

got the guy, saved the day, or beat all the odds. I'd cringe at the dramatic irony that foiled the characters I held so dear, and barely held back the tears when things didn’t go just right. I’d rage and fume at the arrogant jerk who always made things worse and then turn around and love him just as much as the character I always pretended to be.

And those little moments, the ones that never failed to make you sigh into a pillow every time you read them, they felt like they were mine, my own piece of magic locked up in a chest that I could go back to whenever I wanted. Sometimes the 'me' I pretended to be felt more real than my actual life.

With great reluctance I gently closed the book held so reverently in front of me and found it a place of honor on my bookshelf among the other jewel toned and loud graphic covers with their sultry black and shiny metallic titles.

Like turning off the mute button on the TV and having the volume abruptly blare out, the argument downstairs filtered

through my hazy state in suddenly sharp focus, and it was obvious my parents had been working up to that pitch for a while. Just like that the magic was gone, like a quivering soap bubble being popped.

.

Another thing I hadn’t noticed was that I was late.

I ran around my room, grabbing a pair of wrinkled jeans from a heap in my closet and a tee shirt before running into the hall. It was even louder out here and I let out a sigh when the bathroom door shut behind me muffling the sound. Usually I was spared the verbal fireballs so early in the morning as they tried to studiously avoid each other from the night before, but it seemed today was an exception. I desperately hoped it wouldn’t become a habit.

I turned on the shower to let the water heat up and was grateful when the noise downed out the last of the commotion from downstairs.

The thing about living in a house where your parents are constantly arguing is that the ensuing silence seems painfully magnified.

Going back into my room I looked for my favorite sandals before remembering their broken strap. It wasn’t the loss of it that bothered me so much as the extra money it would cost to replace them. I was determined to buy a car the second I got my license if it meant avoiding awkward rides to school and work, and every penny counted.

Creeping slowly down the stairs I held onto the banister for support and eased into the kitchen with careful steps. The cold silence, an aftermath of the previous round of useless

anger, frosted over the kitchen, and I was afraid of shattering the thin ice just by breathing too loud.

You know those old fashion grandfather clocks? The ones that make a tic-tock noise as they count down the seconds and you only seem to notice when it’s completely silent and you’re trying to fall asleep? That was the sound going on in my head right now. I felt like at any second the minute hand would strike the hour and with a sudden

, the fragile silence would be broken.

I couldn’t help but wonder what mornings were like in other families… I bet they’d say

at least; maybe

Or even a simple smile across the table. It was all a foreign concept to me.

Mom left first, and always being the more dramatic of the two, made a good show of sweeping her purse off the counter and slamming the front door shut behind her, of course I knew the routine wasn’t finished until I heard the familiar screech of her tires pulling out of the driveway.

Dad let out a sigh, like it was suddenly easier to breathe now that they weren’t in the same room, and sadly I knew that feeling all too well.

“Right, let’s get you to school”

He finished the rest of his coffee in one quick swallow and left the cup in the sink before grabbing his briefcase and walking out the door. I shouldered my bag and quickly rinsed out the mug, knowing it would lead to an argument

later. Not that it would stop it from happening anyway, but at least then I knew I tried.

The ride to Westover High was silent as usual, and while I itched to turn on the radio or pop in a CD it felt like somehow that would make it even more awkward. It's not like I could relax enough to enjoy it. Instead I looked out the window, picturing myself in the shoes of my favorite lady warrior Alanna of Trebond and wondering if a horse cost any less than a car…

***

"It was like, the most boring four hours of my life, and

signed up for a whole day," Amanda said sympathetically as we made our way back to the lockers after lunch.

We'd both started taking driving lessons and had to take in-class sessions on safe driving to get lower insurance. Mandy had opted for the four-hour session that happened over four days while I'd gone for the eight hour session over two days.

"At least I'll be done sooner" I replied with a shrug.

"I barely made it through the afternoon without falling asleep. You just have to sit there and listen to them talk, watch all these completely boring road safety videos, and then there are all these worksheets. Worksheets Arya!"

I couldn't help but laugh a little at her indignation. Honestly, they could throw all the worksheets and tests at me that they wanted. If it meant being able to drive any sooner it was completely worth it.

"At least your parents don't have a conniption every time you get behind the wheel. My mom holds onto the arm rest

like a life preserver and thinks I’m going to hit every car on her side, and my dad always gets mad at other drivers not being considerate of the ‘student driver’ sign and reaches over to honk the horn at them”

“Sounds stressful,” she said with a wan smile.

I rolled my eyes at the understatement. “You have no idea”

The bell rang and we went our separate ways. When I first walked into class I almost thought I’d stepped into the wrong room. Most of the desks were pushed up against the walls and only a few had been arranged around the room. Mr. Andrews walked around placing a sheet of paper on each and the students that had already come were standing near the back wall.

I walked over to join them and hopped up to sit on one of the desks until the second bell rang. The good thing about sitting at the back wall the perfect and yet not too obvious view of the classroom door, so when Wes walked in I didn’t even have to turn away and pretend not to be staring.

His eyes scanned over the class and met mine for a second before he walked towards the rest of us, and hopped onto a desk just two away from mine, and suddenly it was like I couldn’t sit still.

It was like that feeling you get when someone’s watching you and you feel all fidgety and nervous, except he

even looking at me and I

felt the need to fiddle with the hem of my shirt and keep looking at my wrist for the time, forgetting in the span of three seconds since I’d last checked that I wasn’t even wearing one. Lets just say I was

glad he wasn’t looking.

Finally the second bell rang and the last few people walked in with Evan in the lead. He shot me a wink just before walking into a table and nearly knocking it down, earning a few giggles around the room.

I smiled slightly and shook my head. Even though we rarely if ever talked Evan always seemed to be flirting with me. I knew he didn’t mean anything by it, but I couldn’t help wondering why he’d decided to single me out.

Mr. Andrews cleared his throat at the front of the room and everyone stopped talking to face him.

“In preparation for your finals I’ve prepared a list of essay questions which some of you may have noticed around the room. You’ll be put into groups and then each member will go to a different table and think up a list of arguments for the question with whoever else is at the table. You’ll rotate through all the tables so everyone gets a chance to answer all the questions, then get back into your original groups and come up with a suitable thesis for each question”

As Mr. Andrews started counting out people to be in groups, I, along with most of the rest of the class, looked around the room to see how many essay questions we’d have to answer. Six. We’d have to make up six different thesis statements. I tried not to groan out loud, but very few others held back from the temptation.

I nodded when I was given number five and waited as the last few people got theirs.

“Alright, get into your groups and decide who’s going to which station first, you’ll get five minutes at each”

.

He pointed around the room to where each group should meet and I pulled a notebook out of my bag before dragging my feet over to the door. A girl with honey blonde hair and an easy smile introduced herself as Grace and the rest of us followed with our names. She automatically took the role of leader, which I think everyone was grateful for and suggested we each pick a table and rotate clockwise around the room. No one objected, and when Mr. Andrews clapped his hands at the front of the room we separated into the stations.

I started walking towards the one furthest from where we were standing and felt a little thrill of excitement when I noticed Wes trailing behind me with his hands in his pockets. He smiled slightly when our eyes met and I realized I'd been staring and whipped my head away in embarrassment without even smiling back.

Three others joined us at the table and Wes ended up standing next to me as we all crowded around trying to read the question. Honestly, the words didn't even process. All I could think was

. It occurred to me that I had the perfect opportunity to talk to him, and not just as the girl who'd ex-best friend cheated on him, but an actually legit excuse.

And even though I'd pictured being all smooth and confident around him, now that he was right here, I couldn't even bring myself to look at him, much less get my mouth to spit out something intelligent.

He was the first to talk, suggesting some ideas for the essay question we were supposed to be answering, and I realized, in my internal quest to find the right conversation starter, I

hadn’t managed to actually look at the question. I quickly looked it over while nodding my head along like I totally agreed, though in reality I hadn’t even noticed the other people who’d walked over to join us.

And then I actually processed the question and the point he’d made and realized it was a really good one. In fact, now that he’d started, he kept firing off a bunch of ideas, and I belatedly remembered I should be writing this down rather than gaping with my mouth wide open.

Okay, so I’d always thought he had the cute, slightly nerdy thing going on, you know, the kind of guy you picture ending up a cute young doctor, complete with the operating room fantasy everyone secretly has… but thinking it and actually seeing how smart he was were two very different things.

A few of the other people around the table started throwing in ideas and I knew I should say something and stop being a freeloader, but I felt way to self conscious to voice anything out loud.

“Any ideas Ary?”

I looked up at the sound of my name to face a boy, I think his name was James but I wasn’t too sure. Even after years of drama classes, I hated being put on the spot and frantically looked down at the question, saying the first thing that came to mind. Everyone looked thoughtful for a moment and I seriously hoped to the fates above that I didn’t make a total ass of myself, but then maybe-James smiled and nodded.

“Nice one”

I tried not to smile too widely when I noticed Wes writing down my idea, but I

pretty stocked he thought it was worth having after his own barrage of ideas. And then in no time at all our five minutes were up and I was reluctantly moving along to the next table.

This was the time of year teachers realized how behind in the syllabus they were and tried to frantically cram it all in. All week lessons had been zipped through, tons of projects, assignments and essays were given out and the workload was almost doubled, which was why I, like everyone else, raced for the door the second the end of the day bell rang for the Easter long weekend.

The parking lot was full of milling students running back and forth between their cars making last minute plans and it took me a while to spot my mothers car near the back of the lot. I made my way across feeling conspicuously left out of the goodbye rituals going on around me. It never really bothered me that I only kept a few close friends around, but after almost a full year at this school it still felt like I didn’t really know anyone well enough to even say hi. Is that some kind of failure?

I shrugged the thought off and slid into the passenger seat without so much as a hello to my mother. It’s not like I would have gotten a response anyway, she was to busy talking into her Bluetooth. Luckily the ride to work was a fast one and I jumped out of the car like the seat was on fire.

The rich aroma of Moonbeams soothed me instantly after a long day, but a little pit of anxiousness replaced the stress as I tied on my apron and walked behind the counter. Matt

gave me a little wave from his place behind the cash register and pointed to the list of recent orders I needed to fill out.

I looked over the first one and took a moment to remember how to make the drink. Even after having worked here for a few months most of the lingo seemed to be in a different language. I pulled out the binder we kept under the counter that Matt had dubbed the

and flipped open the back page to figure out what it meant to make a drink ‘upside down’.

Like always as the night wore on, the knot of tension in my stomach unraveled as I filled each order, having to rely less on the instructions as I got into the flow of things. It seemed like only minutes later when my four-hour shift was over and I was waiting outside on the curb for my ride home.

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that no teenager does homework on the first night before a long weekend, or any weekend for that matter, so I really don’t know what I was thinking as I unzipped my backpack to pull out my biology textbook. The impulse didn’t get much further than that though, because sticking out of the pages was a folded up note I remembered passing back and forth with Mandy this morning.

Being as easily distracted as I was I started rummaging through and came up with dozens more folded notes and doodles, little poems and scripted conversations hidden in every recess of my backpack. It was practically a treasure trove in here of little scraps of paper and ripped out notebook pages, nothing I could possible throw away.

With a sudden strike of inspiration I ran down to the garage and pulled out a large shoebox from the recycle bin; a memory box, that was exactly what I needed.

After covering the shoe box in sheets of black and white paper in what I liked to think of as ‘abstract’, I held the back end of a black marker up to my mouth and contemplated the blank canvas before me. I remember a year ago taking a calligraphy class, thinking it would be so cool to be able to write in that curly Victorian script that always looked so effortless. In reality it hadn’t been nearly so easy.

Needless to say the class had been a complete waste of time, my writing still only barely neater than any boy’s. But I’d kept the slanted black marker, liking the way a thin line became thicker with every curved stroke. It was something at least. In fact, if you took a few steps back, tilted your head a little to the left and squinted, it looked pretty. At least that’s what I told myself.

I started pulling books off my shelf and flipping through each one for a quote I loved and switched between my calligraphy pen and a silver sharpie as I customized my new memory box, my own personal time capsule into the high school life of Arya Simons.

Collecting other odds and ends from around my room I started piling them in. Bunches of folded up notes passed back and forth during classes, pictures printed off for ten cents apiece. In went Valentines Day cards that had funny or cute messages, the clues from the scavenger hunt we didn’t win, movie stubs and tickets from the drama show. I carefully pulled out the pressed carnation Michael had given me from between the pages of a math textbook I never opened and placed it gently inside my program from the show. And finally at the very top, my favorite card;

It was surreal to think the box could already be half full with less than a year behind me, but if these were the best years of my life, I wanted to remember every second of them. Once I'd taken a last look through my school bag and around the room I placed the lid on the box and knelt down to shove it to the back of the bed.

It was 3:00am when I got the call.

At first I thought I'd accidentally set my alarm forgetting it was Good Friday, and then it processed that my alarm went off with a shrill ringing, not the buzzing vibrations I was hearing.

.

I reached down beside my bed, and ran my hand along the floor until my fingers brushed over the cold surface of my cell.

Bringing the phone up to eye level I squinted at the too bright display and tried to make out the name printed there.

…

For a moment I just stared at the little ellipsis flashing one after another and almost dropped the phone when it suddenly vibrated again. I blinked several times trying to wake myself up as I flipped it open and brought it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"

His voice sounded groggy and I was immediately alert, worried something was wrong. When he didn't continue I called out his name. No answer.

“Michael? Are you there? Is everything alright?” I tried again.

There was a clatter on the other end of the phone and then someone swore loudly. I strained to hear what was going on but there was only a rustling, like the connection was breaking up, and then silence.

I pulled the phone away from my ear, looking down at the screen to see if the call had disconnected, but the timer counting my minutes was still ticking away. I brought it back and repeated his name.

“

”

I breathed out in relief, not realizing I’d been holding my breath. “Yes I’m here, what’s happening?”

“

My mind was slow in picking up what I was hearing and I tried to mentally talk myself through the situation, someone was drunk, Brad? No, their designated driver… so they were at a bar, but Michael was underage wasn’t he? Yes, until late June, that’s why he couldn’t call his parents. And now he wanted me to come get him but…

“Michael, I don’t have my license” I said with a slight laugh, wondering if he was joking, thinking this was probably all part of an elaborate birthday prank call.

. I panicked slightly, not sure what to say. I hesitated for a moment before my rational side kicked in; it was obvious I couldn’t go.

“Don’t you have anyone else to pick you up?”

“Why don’t you call a cab?”

He pleaded on the other end.

It was those three words that did it.

Michael needed me. Michael freaking Conner needed

. And that’s how I found myself easing into the front seat of my mother’s car at 3:07 in the morning.

The reality of the situation hit me like a brick wall. Was I really doing this? Driving in the middle of the night, without a license? I reassured myself this would be just fine. I’d done this in drivers-ed a dozen times, and no one else would be on the roads at this time. It calmed me down somewhat, but I knew I wasn’t really fooling myself. If I got caught…

No way, I couldn’t even begin to think about that.

With a deep breath I shoved the key into the ignition and turned on the car. I was sure the loud noise of the engine coming to life would wake my parents, but after holding my breath for several beats and waiting, I knew no one was coming out. I put the gear into reverse and felt the car roll backwards down the sloped driveway before quickly easing my foot down on the break.

. I chastised myself.

Barely lifting my foot off the break I let the car crawl down the rest of the driveway and started turning the wheel to back out properly.

.

I hit the break again roughly causing the car to jerk to a halt and slid the strap across my chest and into place. I finally managed to pull out and face the road before remembering I needed to adjust the mirror. Holding back a sigh of frustration I reached up to move it. I was off to a bad start, doing everything out of order, but I told myself it was just nerves. I was fine. Just fine.

Double-checking that I could see from every mirror, and remembering to shoulder check before easing away from the curb, I put the car into drive and gently pushed down on the accelerator. The car lurched forward into motion before easing into a steady pace and I didn't dare go above 30mph. A mental checklist kept running through my brain and I looked into my rearview mirror every three seconds worried that someone would end up behind me and I'd have to speed up. The coast remained clear though and I reached the end of the street where I had to make a turn. I flipped down the indicator, and the green flashing arrow on the dash pointed left, not the direction I needed to go.

.

I quickly changed the signal, looked in every direction and made the turn, remembering at the last minute to look further ahead where I wanted the car to go and not at the curb or I'd end up hitting it.

Relaxing slightly I sped up slightly and managed to turn the indicator on correctly at the next intersection bringing me out of the residential area. I knew I had to follow the speed limit now or risk getting pulled over so I watched the dial as it moved up from 45mph to 50mph, and then to 60mph. Another car came up beside me in the next lane and for a moment I panicked, thinking I'd been caught, when they sped past me.

It was a straight road now and I relaxed more as the minutes ticked by, telling myself this wasn't so bad. I was able to stay pretty well centered in the lane and stopped well before the line at the red lights. My confidence increased as I made another successful turn into road that would bring me to the bar and looked for the sign to know which plaza to get into. I momentarily worried about parking, but as luck would have it there were two empty stalls next to each other. I gave myself a lot of room, and even though I ended up crooked and double parked, I had made it, and this would all be over soon.

Pulling out my cell I hit the redial button and waited several long rings before someone finally answered.

"Michael? Is that you? I'm here"

He slurred on the other end.

I pulled the phone away frowning. He'd sounded completely sober the last time we'd spoken, and that had only been around twenty minutes ago. I was about to tell him to come out when the line went dead, and was forced to wait anxiously in the car; there was no way I was coming out.

Finally after ten minutes had dragged by three guys stumbled out of the doors and I recognized Michael from the light of the sign. Not wanting to unlock the doors I cracked the window open instead and waved a hand out. Michael waved back seeing me and then all three made their way fumbling over each other to the car.

I shouldn't have been surprised I was supposed to give all these guys a ride home, but I guess it hadn't clicked that it would be more than just Michael. Well it was already far too late. I'd dug my grave, jumped in and already shoveled half the dirt back in around me, packed it in even; there was no

way out of this situation without getting everyone, myself included, into even worse trouble.

I reluctantly hit the unlock button as the boys reached the car. I knew Brad and vaguely recognized the other boy as one who sat at the center table, but I didn’t know his name. Brad opened the back door and immediately threw himself across the seats with a loud groan. Mystery boy laughed and almost hit his head against the top of the car as he shoved Brad partway off the seat and stumbled in half on top of him. Some half hearted and very uncoordinated wresting started going on in the back of the car while Michael slid into the front seat only slightly more gracefully than his friends. He turned to me with a lazy grin, and it was obvious from the glossy look to his eyes he was substantially drunker than before on the phone.

“Where am I going first?” I asked hesitantly.

Michael blinked at me a few times before fumbling around in his coat pocket and handing me a slip of paper with an address on it before leaning his head against the window.

I squinted down at the numbers, trying to make out the messy writing, and was extremely grateful when I recognized the street and avenue numbers, and then noticed Brad scribbled across the back. At least I wouldn’t be lost on top of everything else. It was a small consolation.

When I’d first agreed to this I figured it would be like driving with my parents, there would be a licensed driver in the passenger seat to keep an eye on things, totally legal, except for the whole crack of dawn thing. Now I knew I was on my own, and somehow it was even more daunting then when I’d set out in the first place. Now I was alone with

three intoxicated guys, at least one of which was underage, and driving without a license.

I realized in the next five seconds how extremely sheltered I'd always been. Somehow I'd gotten through almost my first whole year of high school without ever having been around someone drunk. My parents didn't even drink, only the occasional glass of wine around the holidays and that's it. I had a feeling after tonight I would forever recognize the smell of stale beer and sweat and associate with this nightmare.

I tried to put my inexperience out of mind and appear confident and grown up even though my mind was screaming for my warm blanket and maybe even a night light for the added comfort, but it's not like anyone was sober enough to notice.

The guys had settled down in the back and it looked like mystery man had already passed out by the time I maneuvered out of my parking space. With a shaking hand I put the car into gear and backed out of the lot, grateful for every meter putting me further away from the bar.

I expected to hear the blaring of a police siren around even corner, at every traffic light or four-way stop, and while the clock above the radio insisted it had only been ten minutes I could swear it was more like thirty.

I was surprised I hadn't managed to pass out because I honestly felt like I couldn't breathe—

Oh dear lord.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel as if it were the last thing tying me to life, which with my suddenly heavy

thoughts seemed more and more likely, and deliberately took in a long deep breath.

It was the wrong thing to do.

My eyes immediately started to water as the thick fumes of alcohol radiating from the boys saturated my lungs and literally seemed to coat my mouth and throat.

I started blinking furiously, now panicking that I couldn't see. What if another car was coming? What if I had swerved into the oncoming lane? What if there was a red light ahead or a deer materialized in front of my car?

A deep sigh escaped as my vision cleared and I reminded myself to take another breath, a smaller one this time, though the smell in the car was starting to make me feel nauseous. It occurred to me that I should crack the window for some relief, but I was too scared to ease the vice-like grip on the wheel even for a second.

Was there such a thing as second hand drinking? Was it possible to get intoxicated just from inhaling the fumes? I

didn’t need to be thinking about that, but now the sudden image of a cop giving me a breath test and arresting me for underage drinking was lodged in my mind. I made a promise right then that if I got through this night I’d never take so much as a sip of alcohol until I was safely past my 18th birthday. And even then, I’d make sure to have a back-up designated driver.

Through some miracle we made it to Brad’s house uncaught and in one piece. I yanked up the parking break and was out of the car before the boys had even realized we’d stopped. My knees felt shaky all of a sudden and I used one hand to support myself against the car with the other leaning on my

knee while I sucked in mouthfuls of blessedly fresh air. It felt like I'd been holding my breath for centuries and it was at least five minutes before I could stand up straight again.

I reached out a hand for the back door and pulled it open, letting the frigid night air wash over my passed out passengers.

"Get out" I was surprised to hear my voice sound so raw and scratchy, but then again, it did feel like I'd woken up out of some nightmare. The boys hardly twitched at the sound of my voice, and rather than risk waking up the neighbors with my sudden urge to yell, I started shaking Mystery guys shoulder.

He groaned in his drunken stupor but didn't react otherwise and I pushed him harder. This was definitely a complication I hadn't foreseen. Luckily, for me that is, when he reached up to swat my hand away he somehow managed to lose his balance and fall off the seat, kicking his foot at Brad in the process.

It was a move that I had no doubt could only be achieved when drunk, and even though both boys were now moaning in pain and grumbling about headaches I didn't feel even an ounce of sympathy.

Brad finally stumbled out of the car and half limped half dragged himself to the door without so much as a backwards glance. Mystery guy reached out to the front and slapped Michael across the head.

He slurred before attempting to crawl out of the car and half falling out onto the asphalt.

I didn't bother to offer him a hand as I made my way around to the passenger side and opened the door, which Michael

had already made a grab for and missed three times.

I looked away, over at the door where Mystery guy had caught up to Brad and had one hand over his trying to guide the key into the door. The sight was comical, and on any other day I would have laughed. You know just how much a situation must suck if you don't even feel like laughing when you know something's funny.

He made it out of the car with more grace than his friend had managed and shot me a lazy smile with his glazed over eyes, and I realized that for the first time since I'd laid eyes on him, I was actually disappointed in Michael Conner.

I must have been pretty obvious about it, because next thing I knew he had his hand under my chin and was turning my head to face him so I could see the repentant expression on his face. One arm was leaning against the car just past me, and while I knew it was only to help keep him upright, the proximity made my slightly dizzy.

Of course that could just be the alcohol fumes.

He said with teasing grin, like he'd already been forgiven.

The pathetic part was, I actually already

relenting.

I turned my head away though so he couldn't see it. The least I could do was maintain the semblance of being annoyed at him until he called me tomorrow to apologize properly and thank me profusely. In fact, maybe he'd even take me out to make up for it. I bit the inside of my cheek, and tried not to get ahead of myself, he was still waiting for some kind of response as his body drooped forward.

All I could manage was a loud sigh, but he took that as an all clear and smiled so bright I was surprised. I'd never seen him smile like that before, and I didn't think it was just the alcohol, but I forgot about it a moment later as he suddenly leaned forward and placed a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

It was the thing I'd been waiting for, but I hadn't wanted it like this, not when he was drunk and minutes away from passing out and probably wouldn't even remember it in the morning. Not at four in the morning when I was driving illegally, still in my pajamas while his idiot friends still hadn't succeeded in opening the door. No, this wasn't like the movies or books at all, not even the worst ones, and that made me unbearably sad.

With one last drunken smile Michael stumbled after his friends. I didn't even wait to see if they'd gotten in as I pulled out and drove back home in almost a trance.

In books parents always seem to have a certain kind of intuition about when their kids steal their car and sneak off in the middle of night to meet up with a boy, and always manage to wake up to sit patiently on the stairs or in the kitchen for said delinquent child to come in and be soundly reprimanded, but when I got in nothing was out of the ordinary. I was momentarily glad this night hadn't been following the script.

Grabbing a bottle of febreeze I padded back out to the car and sprayed a liberal amount over all the seats and clothes, leaving the doors wide open for several minutes in the hopes it would air out. I stood out in the cold for as long as I could take before opening all the windows a quarter of an inch and locking the car back up. Putting the keys back on the middle hook where I'd found them I crept up my stairs to my room.

I slid back under the covers and dropped my phone back on the floor right where it had been before the call. Aside from the glowing letters on my bedside clock saying 4:36am, it was like the last hour and a half hadn’t happened. By the time my eyes started dropping shut I’d almost convinced myself it had all been a silly dream and drifted off with pictures of my Knight in Shining Armor leaping off his white horse to sweep me up in a perfectly non-drunken kiss worthy of any movie, book, or song that was sure to become a reality.

Alone on Cloud 9 (14)

Hands down the hardest chapter to write, but it should give you something to think about, lets just say you’re about to find out the motivation for the Incident…

On a completely unrelated note I saw the Wicked musical last night and I think I'll be star struck for days, so amazing!

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 14

It was one of those perfect calm nights. The weather was warm without being humid and settled around you like a blanket, the air was light with only faint wisps of a breeze. The sun was setting lazily, burning the horizon a rusty orange and metallic pink, and inside Moonbeams everyone seemed ready to doze off to the sounds of soft music drifting through the speakers and the heady smell of hot chocolate you could practically taste in the air.

I thought sarcastically.

“Will you quit glaring? You’re scaring our customers.”

“I’m

glaring.”

“Well than can you stop frowning murderously? You’re—“

I whirled around and tossed the dishrag I was using at Charlie, cutting off whatever he was about to say.

“

, that’s just rude.” He said, putting a hand over his heart.

“Sorry, I’m just a little on edge.”

“Clearly.”

I picked up another rag to throw at him but instead it hit the door just as he passed through and with a sigh I picked up my tray of freshly washed mugs and followed him out.

It really

been the perfect night, right up until ten minutes ago when the doors slammed open to the smirking face of Michael Conner. He’d flashed me a lazy grin and sauntered off to his table, leaving his friends at the doorway. Tyler waved cheerfully at me, as if we’d known each other forever, and Ben raised his hand in greeting before trailing after his friends, bobbing his head along to a beat only he seemed to hear.

It’s not like his being here was any surprise or even out of the ordinary, I hadn’t exactly been able to forget my Michael free weekend was over, but I also didn’t forget the argument I’d overheard before he left. Really it was just a matter of how long he’d be content not annoying me, and I wanted to get the confrontation over with.

Charlie moved to stand in front of me, blocking my view of the room and frowning thoughtfully as he tapped a finger

against his chin, always the dramatist.

“Is this about—”

“I’m here!”

We both jumped in surprise as Grace dropped a stack of library books onto the counter with a loud slap. It was obvious from her flushed cheeks and the curls falling out of her hair clips that she’d rushed over here.

“Here for what?”

“Moral support obviously.” She said with a roll of the eyes.

“Ah, so this

about Friday.”

“

.”

“Yes.” Grace said at the same time.

I tried to convey a ‘shut up’ in the glare I was sending her way as she rattled off the main points to Charlie but she was too busy settling into one of the three barstools on the other side of the counter to notice.

“Thanks for sharing Grace.”

She ignored me while turning around in her seat to dig through the bag hanging on the back and whipped her head back moments later with a gleeful expression.

“Well,

should make you feel better.”

“What?”

She nodded off to the corner and I followed her gaze to see, with a jolt of surprise, Wes Pierson at a shadowed table near the back. He was hunched over a pile of textbooks, and it worried me to admit it, but something inside me just… melted a little.

Honestly, I felt a little star struck, which was completely ridiculous, he was just another boy… but he

. He was also Shy Guy, closet romantic, and that made him a little something more.

Charlie was pestering Grace for a name, which she gave up easily of course, earning a low whistle from him.

“Well, at least you’ve finally got some good taste, that boy’s had it bad for you since tenth grade.”

Of course

got my attention.

“What are you talking about?”

“Wes, he likes you.” He said casually, stacking glasses on the shelves under the counter.

“No he doesn’t,” I said with a laugh.

He raised an eyebrow and shifted his gaze to the back table for a moment before looking back at me. “Trust me, guys know when another guy is interested in a girl.”

“Ooh how?” Grace asked excitedly, leaning across the counter.

Me, I was too busy internally freaking out to pay attention to his answer, thinking

. But what if it was? If it was then… no, I couldn’t even face what that might mean, and while it might make me a coward, it was easier to tell myself Charlie was wrong, dead wrong, than to face the possibilities.

Charlie winked and raised a finger to his lips. “Sorry, that’s a trade secret.” I looked between them wondering what she’d asked to get that response.

Grace frowned and I knew she was about to argue when Charlie suddenly smirked, said, “He’s looking,” and elbowed me in the ribs forcing me to look up too.

I felt myself smiling even though I knew he couldn’t see it from all the way across the room, but it was just one of those things you can’t help.

“Wave.” Charlie said beside me.

“No way, that’s

awkward.”

“

.” He insisted, nearly pulling my arm up himself.

I did then, more a spasm of the hand than anything and it was about ten times more awkward than I thought it would be.

“God, I fell like an idiot.”

“Well get over it, he’s coming over here.” He said with a smug grin.

Grace let out what could only be classified as a squeak, which somehow made things seem infinitely more alarming, and quickly opened one of the books in front of her.

“Shit what do I do? What do I

”

My immediate thought was to panic; instead I sucked in a deep breath and tried to control the blush threatening to surface.

“

. He might not be coming here for you, after all this

happen to be an over glorified coffee shop, and this

to be where you order drinks, and you

happen to work here.”

“

Charlie.”

“You know, I’m really loving this.”

He moved off a little, busying himself with a machine, but I knew he was listening, just like Grace was, when Wes came up to the counter, and it occurred to me this was the first time I actually had an audience with him.

“Hey.”

He stuck both his hands in his pockets, causing his shoulders to rise a little, and the whole thing was so adorably sweet I was afraid I'd pull a wicked witch right here and turn into a sappy puddle of mush.

I don't know what it was about him that always turned me into a starry eyed teenager having her first crush.

"Hey, don't see you around here very often."

"Yeah, my mom sort of kicked me out of the diner." He said with a grin.

"How'd she manage that?"

"Oh, you know my mom," He said with a roll of the eyes.

From the corner of my eye I could see Grace's eyes go wide over her book as she mouthed

repeatedly and I was suddenly glad Charlie was behind meso I was spared his reaction.

"Basically she said if I didn't, and I quote, 'get a life', she'd call up the friends in her book club and find one for me."

I couldn't help but laugh, being able to easily picture Melanie Pierson saying, and meaning the threat.

"I don't think she meant coming here to

."

He leaned forward over the counter, lips pulled up into a half smile.

"Well, you're not going to tell her are you?" His voice was low and all kinds of faint inducing, and I thought

—

“Hey Arya.”

I jerked upright, blinking in surprise, and it took a moment for the person in front of me to come into focus. Of course then all my anxiety from earlier came back in a sharp strike and I felt myself tensing up defensively.

“Michael.”

With a barely there smile he looked pointedly at Wes who mouthed ‘I’ll wait’ and slid into a seat on the other side of Grace, who immediately snapped her mouth shut—she’d been ‘

at an even more alarming rate the last few seconds.

Michael continued to watch him for a few moments as Charlie walked over and started up a low conversation. I only had a second to hope he wouldn’t say anything embarrassing before Michael cleared his throat, calling my attention back to him.

“So, you like him or something?” He asked casually.

The question caught me completely off guard and before I could think I blurted out a harsh “No” before realizing he was

.

“I—We’re umm, friends.” I added quickly.

I glanced over to see if he’d heard and thought he looked slightly hurt, but the emotion was gone in a moment and I couldn’t tell if he had or not.

not

Needing a distraction while the thoughts flew through my head I grabbed a mug from the tray Charlie and I had brought in and fumbled around for a rag, scrubbing at it roughly.

It made me uncomfortably aware of what Charlie had said only a few minutes ago; could guys really tell when another was interested in a girl? Did that mean Wes—

"So, aren't you going to ask how my interview went?" Michael asked cheerfully, leaning against the counter, completely oblivious to the internal train wreck I was having.

I didn't even look up from the glass I was meticulously drying to reply back with a simple tense "No."

I could feel his eyes on me, and I was sure that if I looked up it would be to see a frown etched on that perfectly arrogant face.

"It went really well." He paused for a moment, as if waiting for some kind of congratulations, which I had no doubt he was fully expecting, but he wouldn't be hearing it from me.

After another beat he continued. "And that means I might be around for a while."

Another pause.

"So I was thinking we should bury this hatchet for real."

My head whipped up in response, sure I'd heard him wrong, and I had the distinct feeling three other heads had turned up as well, but the smug expression on his face made it

clear I wasn't hearing things, and that I'd finally given him the reaction he wanted.

He waited another second, another dramatic pause before, "I'm sorry."

Two little words, just three syllables, and they turned my world upside down. Truthfully, I'd pictured him apologizing a million times, groveling, begging for me to forgive him. But five seconds after he rolled into town I abandoned that possibility. Yet here it was, right in front of me,

.

"I shouldn't have dragged you into it, maybe if I'd bothered to get to know you first, I mean, you're not that bad you know?"

My mouth was hanging open by now. This was so wrong. This was so

according to the script. We were supposed to embrace our bitter rivalry with contempt and derision for as long as we both shall live. Wasn't that the unspoken agreement? He wasn't supposed to be sorry, I'd be stupid to believe him—

And of course that was the answer.

I'd be stupid to believe him.

This was Michael Conner. He'd lied to me for months, strung me along like his little marionette, like a little dog that jumped at his every whim.

I could feel his eyes on me, watching the emotions run across my face, and it was obvious he could read the skeptical angry look now as he let out a deep sigh.

“What, don’t I get a second chance?”

“You

a second chance, and a third and a fourth. You’re all out of chances Michael.” I whispered furiously, conscious of the people around us.

"Yeah, I didn't think it would be that easy.” He said casually.

All the arrogance that had melted away earlier, for his brief lapse into an apology, was back, as if he didn't remotely doubt his ability to get my forgiveness. And honestly, for the first time since he'd been back, I was scared out of my mind.

With his announcement made I expected him to go on his way, mission accomplished, checkmate or something, and leave me to my bewilderment, instead he continued leaning against the countertop, staring at me expectantly.

“Well?” He asked impatiently.

“Well what?”

“Aren’t you going to say it back?”

I couldn’t hold back a scoff as I finally set down the cup I’d been needlessly drying and pretended to be absorbed in the coffee bible, avoiding his and the other three sets of eyes staring intently at me, all pretense at not listening abandoned.

“No, I have nothing to be sorry for.”

He scowled slightly and pulled out of his casual stance, turning to face me directly and reaching a hand across the

counter to snap the binder shut.

“Yes you do.”

“

, I’m pretty sure I don’t.”

“You—“

“And besides,” I interrupted, trying for an innocent smile, "You already forgave me, remember?”

His eyebrows pulled together in confusion before I saw the realization hit his eyes recalling the first time he’d talked to me at Moonbeams, and then they narrowed.

His voice was tight with barely suppressed annoyance when he muttered a bitter, “Fine.”

I smiled back widely, “Fine.” And in my head I saw the game board spin a one-eighty, handing the checkmate to me.

***

“You’ve been holding out on me, I did

know you were on flirting terms with Wes Pierson!”

I felt myself turn a deep crimson and motioned for Grace to keep her voice down. She’d been giving me accusing looks all morning and started harassing me for details all through lunch.

“That’s not what we were doing.” I insisted for what seemed like the millionth time.

“Oh yes it was, I was

, and I can’t believe you didn’t tell me! You’ve met his mom? God, if you’re having a secret love affair and didn’t tell me —“

“Grace! Hit the brakes, we’re just friends, and I met his mom at their

.”

She paused in her excitement for a moment and turned to face me looking serious. “Why’d you tell Michael you didn’t like him?”

“I…I don’t know, I just panicked.”

“I think he heard. In fact, I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah, that would explain why he got out of there so fast,” I responded glumly, walking past her.

Needless to say, whatever victory I’d felt over Michael last night had been short lived. Grace went back to pretending to read her book, Charlie shifted awkwardly from foot to foot —a sure sign that things were bad, and Wes abruptly made up excuses to go back to the Diner, avoiding looking at me the whole time.

I dragged my feet along the scuffed floors, trailing reluctantly behind my class as we joined the rest of the senior class pouring into the gymnasium. This happened every year; the Principal would gather everyone into our little gym that always smelled of rubber and sweat to make a grand address to the graduating class.

You know those times when you look back on your life? Back to when you were a kid or had your first crush, or back to the beginning of the year. It could be a short amount of time

or long, but you always think one of two things; either everything is different, or nothing has changed.

Depending on the circumstance whichever one you fit into could be bad or good, but I think both are better than the alternative: being one of the people who looks back and realizes both. Everything is different, but nothing’s changed, you’re just stuck in the same rut, repeating the same pattern over again, not going backwards but not moving forwards either.

Don't get me wrong, I was so completely looking forward to graduation, leaving behind these halls that haunted me and the curious looks that had never really stopped following me, but it had me thinking, what did I have to show for three years of high school?

I still hadn't gotten closure from the incident, still obsessed over Michael Conner, granted in a different light, but still. And while my name was known by most I still had only a few close friends, and only one best friend, just Grace instead of Mandy. I still, after three years only barely started talking to Wes. I still pined over his poems as Shy Guy, still wished I knew more about this guy who was also well known in an infamous way, and only recently admitted I actually had a crush on the guy.

Wasn't high school supposed to be this big life changing experience? The best years of my life?

I followed Grace up the bleachers to a spot at the back where we could lean against the wall. After everyone was settled the Principal came to the front, talking about his first year at the school and how far Westover has come and how we were all part of this community, you know, the usual. It sounded to me like a preview of the speeches we’d hear at

graduation until he talked about stayed focused for the last pull of the year and that even with commencement coming up we would have exams soon after.

.

“And now, I’d like to introduce the Class of 2008’s Valedictorian. Please give a round of applause for Wes Pierson.”

I could only gape in shock as Wes stood up from his seat near the front and gave a slightly hesitant wave around him as the senior class broke into applause.

Maybe it shouldn’t have been such a surprise, I’d known he was smart, trying to get a scholarship, but I didn’t know he was

smart,

smart.

I mean, I’m not going to lie, I always believed in the cliché that some nerdy social outcast that no one really knew would end up with the highest mark. It almost seemed unfair that the smartest guy in our school was also cute beyond belief.

His eyes passed over the crowd, and for a second they met mine, but unlike usual his gaze didn’t linger before passing over, and I couldn’t help but feel disappointed, as I slumped down low in my spot.

“Now, now, settle down. We’ve also called you all here to pick up your grad gowns for the ceremony. Tables are at the back according to last name, please line up in an orderly fashion.”

The last words were spoken in a rush that was almost a yell since half the stands were already pouring out to mob the tables.

“Wow, that’s so cool, did you know he was in the running for that?” Grace asked beside me.

“No, I didn’t.”

, and mostly it made me sad that I still didn’t after having had so many classes with him the last three years.

We took our time getting down and separated to join different lines for our grad gowns. Most people in line were chattering excitedly to a friend or someone else close by, and again I was reminded that aside from The Incident I didn’t have much of a name for myself here.

Sure, everyone knew Arya Simons, but they didn’t bother talking to me for real unless it was to ask about Michael, or details about the day I wanted so badly to erase.

Trying to look unaffected I looked over at the line beside mine and noticed Amanda standing there with her head bowed, hands in her pockets, also not speaking to anyone.

I was debating whether or not to talk to her when Paige walked by, having just finished in line and walked right past her supposed best friend, ignoring her completely, and that decided me.

Crazy as it was, a big part of me still missed her. You can’t just forget someone who was such a big part of your life.

“Hey Mandy.”

She looked up in surprise, as if she wasn’t used to having her name randomly called out by someone, and sadly I knew the feeling. Her surprise was even greater when she realized it had come from me.

“Hey, I uh… are you okay?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t I be?”

She looked around her with a worried expression and leaned across the space between our lines.

“You know, last night at Moonbeams… everyone’s talking about it.”

She looked guilty for having to be the one to tell me, but I was glad someone had. Now that she’d said it though I noticed a few heads turning quickly away from me.

“Last name?”

I whirled back to face forward and realized I was already at the front of the line.

“Simons.”

The woman ran a red acrylic nail down the list of names and reached behind her to dig through a large box on the floor. She pulled out a neatly wrapped package and handed it to me. Through the clear casing I could see the carefully folded grad gown in a cerulean blue and the mortarboard. Our school had sprung for the cheaper ones and they would be ours to keep, but I couldn’t see why you’d possibly want you’re high school graduation gown after the ceremony.

I wandered out of the gym towards my locker, noticing the seniors along the way grabbing books and heading off to

class. I took my time walking, not in any rush to get to third period, and stood in front of my locker wondering if I could afford dallying a while longer when Evan suddenly appeared standing in front of me.

I pushed him out of the way and reached up to place my grad gown on the top shelf.

“So, word on the street is the Big Bad Wolf is changing his ways.”

“English please?”

“Michael apologized.”

I didn’t miss the slight accusation in his voice and felt a moment’s stab of hurt.

Closing my locker, I slowly turned to face Evan, noticing that for maybe the second time since I’d met him, he actually looked serious. But worse then that, I couldn’t read the look in his eyes, and Evan was usually an open book.

Clearly everyone was missing a very key detail in the rumors, I didn’t actually

his apology.

I felt instantly defensive, and maybe just a little resentful that he would believe everyone so easily.

“Why are you mad at

? I didn’t

him be sorry.”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“How’d you find out anyway? Did Wes tell you?”

He looked confused for a moment and shook his head slowly. “No, Wes isn’t really much of a gossip after what happened to him.”

“Oh.”

. I suddenly felt awful for saying it.

“I don’t trust him.”

“Neither do

.”

With an annoyed sigh I shouldered past him and made my way down the hall, ignoring the heads that turned my way, following my steps.

People had no subtlety these days.

I heard heavy steps behind me, and then a hand on my shoulder, pulling me back around.

“Look, I didn’t mean to jump to conclusions or anything, I just wanted to know if—“

“If I forgave him? How

I? I’m the one who can’t go to the cafeteria anymore, I’m the one who has to relive it

. You think with one little apology I’m just going to fall back in his arms?”

“Okay. I get it. I’m sorry, I was just trying to look out for a friend.”

“Funny, I thought I was one too.”

“

I didn’t give him a chance to finish, taking an abrupt turn down the hall instead, the opposite direction of my class. Things would never change would they? For as long as Michael Conner was around he’d make sure to ruin everything.

And I was suddenly tired of it, so,

tired of it. Would it ever be old news? I wanted so badly not to be the fallback topic of gossip, I wanted to fast forward to a time when we could all just look back and laugh. Sure, it might be a shrill forced laugh, but I’d take even that. I wanted to go back to the anonymity of being a nobody on the first day of school. I wanted to be that girl in the back of science class easily forgotten, or the quiet girl in social class no one really remembered the name of.

And I wanted out. Out of this school, out of this town, just

.

I slammed open the front doors to the school, walking directly towards my car at the end of the parking lot. A distant part of my mind registered that I was cutting class, but I was so beyond caring.

In the books, the heroine always has some way out after a tough situation; they move away, change schools, graduate, they get a clean slate. In reality I had to face the humiliation for the last two years. There was no do-over, no transferring out, no new kids coming in to diffuse the tension. Nothing. I was forced to face the same kids everyday, the same students who’d been witness to it all.

The roads were empty this time of day and I drove around absently, only to find myself in front of Mel's Diner. I hesitated for a minute feeling slightly nervous before pushing the door open and hovering there uncertainly. I didn't know why I was so anxious.

Well okay, it might have

to do with a certain cute boy with messy brown hair… who was suddenly avoiding me.

I

didn’t get boys.

Still, I badly wanted to go in, and the boy in question was stuck at school for another hour and a half.

Walking in I felt my shoulders slump in immediate relief and looked around to see just a few booths taken with the lingering lunch crowd.

Ms. Pierson waved cheerfully as I made my way over to the vinyl barstools that lined the counter. I saw her gaze slide to the clock hanging against the far wall, probably registering that I was skipping class, but she didn’t comment, and I gratefully pulled a menu towards me just for something to look at.

“Hiding again dear?”

“Not exactly” I sighed. “Maybe.”

Was that what this was? Hiding?

Whatever righteous indignation I’d felt at school had long since disappeared on the ride over. There were a lot of

people at Westover who deserved being snapped at, but Evan wasn't one of them. He was one of the few who had never treated me like a museum exhibit because of the Incident and the

one to actually ask about last night to get the truth. I felt nothing but guilty for taking out my anger on him.

"I think I just accused Evan of being a bad friend." I blurted out.

Ms. Pierson raised an eyebrow, but there was no judgment in her eyes and I found myself completely relieved she didn't suddenly think the worst of me. It was an odd feeling, wanting approval from this woman I hardly knew.

She paused thoughtfully for a moment, taking her time to wipe down the counter before meeting my eyes.

"Evan's a good boy. He and my son have known each other since the third grade but they've had their share of arguments. Wes has always been of the opinion that it's better to never have had something than to lose it. If it weren't for Evan always pushing him I think he'd be afraid to live his own life. Countless times I've heard him yell at my son to 'man up and quit being a coward' and Wes has told him off for it just as often." She said with a laugh.

"My point is, a good friend isn't so easily lost, but it works both ways."

"So… does that mean he'll forgive me?"

"I'm sure of it darling."

***

After a while I decided to head to work. It was still early and the room was mostly empty. I took the opportunity to drop into one of the beanbag chairs scattered around the edges of the room. Over in the corner by the stage a girl was gently strumming a guitar. I couldn’t hear the cords being played but the motion of her fingers across the strings were slow and languid. Across the room some guy was sprawled out across a couch fast asleep, using his backpack as a pillow. It was refreshing being on the other side of the counter, no one even looked my way and that was a nice change.

It was with great reluctance I finally got up to head to the back room as the lazy silence changed to a steady buzz of conversation.

There was a momentary hush when Michael walked in, as if everyone expected one of us to yell out a cheery greeting.

Please.

But for once I hardly spared him a third glance, because coming in just behind him was Evan and I felt a sudden knot of tension tug in the pit of my stomach.

He wasn’t exactly a regular customer here, and as his eyes scanned the room and landed on me, it was obvious why he’d come.

I was nervous, definitely a first with Evan, but he was back to being an open book and looked relieved as he stopped in front of me.

“Arya, I didn’t mean—“

“I know. I shouldn’t have—“

“Yeah, I get it.”

I smiled slowly, surprised and glad that some things actually could be easy.

“So… we’re good?”

“Almost.” He smirked and raised his finger in a ‘come here’ gesture.

Letting out a dramatic sigh I walked around the counter and hugged him. He threw one arm loosely around me and used the other to ruffle up my hair. I made a face at him and stepped out of range, lifting my hands up to fix it when he gabbed my wrists and pulled them back down.

“Don’t ruin my work of art,” He said with mock indignation.

I elbowed him in the ribs and ducked behind the counter with a laugh while he stood there clutching at his stomach as if it actually hurt and started moaning about the pain.

We were still joking around when Michael walked up, and I couldn’t help but notice he always managed to show up when I was talking to a boy, was he still so intent to mess with my life?

“Can I get a white hot chocolate, extra hot, with whip cream?”

Evan didn’t try to hide the look of hostility on his face, and the boys seemed to be having some kind of glare off when I turned back from switching on the milk steamer.

I looked between them for a minute until Evan finally turned back to me with a wide grin and made a big show of blowing me a kiss.

I mouthed ‘loser’ and he made a heart shape with his hands and mimed it breaking while Michael watched us with a sour look on his face.

Personally I thought it was hilarious, it

an added bonus that it seemed to piss him off though.

He waited until Evan had walked out of hearing distance before watching me with a slight frown.

“You’ve changed you know.”

I paused in the act of pouring his drink and held back a bitter laugh.

“

haven’t.” I replied back casually, pushing the cup across the counter.

He ran his finger around the rim, deep in thought.

“You think it was all a game, that I was just messing with you for fun. I wasn’t, I had my reasons. There was a reason I picked you.” He murmured quietly.

I was taken aback for a minute. He picked me? That couldn’t be right. I was the one who picked

didn’t I? From almost the first day of school I’d liked him…

He was oddly silent after his admission, only half paying attention, and then he picked up his drink to leave, just like that, so I don’t know

possessed me to call his attention back.

“Why’d you do it?”

The words spilled out of my mouth before I even realized I was thinking it, but then, it had always been there hadn’t it? Just waiting for an answer.

He turned back around to look at me, really look at me, maybe for the first time not seeing me as the helpless girl he’d used and humiliated.

I thought he wouldn’t reply, part of me expected and hoped he would just keep walking away, but then he took a step closer, blocking my view of the room so all I could see were those familiar liquid silver eyes.

“Mandy never told you did she?”

Immediately my mind flew to the conversation I overheard a few nights ago.

Bastard. You

she hasn’t.

I didn’t say anything, afraid he would stop, because this was it, he was finally going to answer.

And in the split second as he opened his mouth, before the words came tumbling out I wondered,

It had been two years after all, maybe the answer was worse knowing than question, but now that I’d finally considered that it was too late, he was already talking and I didn’t have the nerve to stop him.

“Mandy and I used to be friends you know.”

.

“We were

friends even though she was two years younger than me.”

His voice was quiet, lost in the memory as he stared just past me, not seeing anything.

“She was different in Junior High you know, quiet and shy, she didn’t have any other friends but me. And when I came to high school she was afraid I’d make new friends and forget her.”

It didn’t make any sense. The girl I’d instantly befriended the first day of school had been confident and fearless.

“She was the only girl who understood me, the coolest girl I knew, and no one even bothered to see her but me. We made a promise that nothing would come between us. I meant that, I meant every damn word. But then she came to Westover and met

.”

I flinched back from the raw bitterness in his voice, but he wasn’t even looking at me, didn’t even seem to be speaking to me anymore, just speaking the words aloud, remembering, caught in the memory. I knew that feeling all too well.

“And just like that she broke her word. She wanted to be a different person here, I got that, I always told her to be more confident, but she was

, and she suddenly didn’t have time for me anymore.”

.

The words went unspoken but they hung in the air between us.

“So I told her to choose. I told her it had to be one or the other, I wasn’t going to share her…” His face twisted up, in anger, in hurt and humiliation, and again I knew the feeling all too well. “…but she picked you. She dropped me, just like that, and I loved her.” He whispered.

No one said anything for a while and the whole place seemed eerily quiet even though I knew they hadn’t heard a single word exchanged between us. My ears felt like they were ringing, like my alarm clock was ringing shrilly in my head and my mind was begging,

, because this had to be a dream.

But the weird thing was, I actually

feel like I had finally woken up, like I could finally see things clearly for the first time in two years, and we were both left blinking blearily under the suddenly too bright lighting of Moonbeams.

Michael let out a sudden breath, and it seemed to be the thing to bring us both back to reality.

“So that’s why.” He stated with a shrug. He didn’t follow it with another apology, and something about the defensive look in his eyes told me he didn’t think he needed to.

And then the conversation we’d had on his first day in town came back to me.

.’

Now I know why he’d said it. All this time he’d blamed me, and maybe,

he’d been slightly justified, but he was mad at the wrong person. It wasn’t my fault.

didn’t ask her to pick, I didn’t tell her to give him up,

.

I wanted to scream it at him, for his stupid grudge, for his petty revenge;

And at the same time I wanted to sympathize with him, for his loss, for his heartbreak…

It was like that love-hate thing all over again, minus the love… and maybe the hate. Dammit, I just didn’t know. I couldn’t afford to not hate him or then where would I be?

Maybe I understood him a little better, but did it really change anything?

Sure he loved her, and that in itself caused my mind to reel, because I didn’t even think him capable of the emotion, but I’d loved

and there was a big difference. Mandy hadn’t meant to break his heart, truthfully I doubt she even knew how he felt, but he knew how I felt and he willfully broke mine

how it felt, so no, it didn’t justify what he did, it didn’t mean he deserved my forgiveness; it didn’t even mean I believed him.

And then the moment, or whatever it was, was gone. Whatever trace of vulnerability had been there, whatever

wisp of humanity he’d conjured up was replaced with the usual mask of superiority and a gloating smile, as if he’d won some sort of game.

He shifted as quickly as if it were only a matter of switching on the two masks of drama. From tragedy to comedy just like that, as if he was in on some joke the rest of us could only guess at, and as he stepped back I couldn’t help but wonder if that was the case, because

was staring at us.

Now of course the sudden eerie silence I’d felt earlier made sense, they may not have heard what we said, but they’d all obviously been watching.

It was like the rules of our game had been switched mid play, hell it was like we’d switched games all together, from biding our time in chess to a sudden game of checkers, and he’d just pulled a lucky triple jump while I stared at the board wondering how I hadn’t noticed the board being changed.

“Anyway, like I said earlier, burying the hatchet right?”

I smirked slightly, “

, it’s not that easy.”

A slow smile spread across his face, like he was actually impressed my by answer. “Guess I’ll just have to keep trying then, and we both know I wont give up until I get what I want, right babe?"

Just like that we were back to normal, and the scary part was, I actually found it more reassuring than the sentimental Michael I’d just been introduced to.

Keeping to the script, I scoffed at the self-assured expression on his face, bristled at his casual way of calling me 'babe', as if I was somehow his.

Nonetheless, I was still confused when he turned to walk slowly back to his usual table, making several backward glances along the way to check that I was still watching. Even though I knew it was all part of the game, I couldn't bring myself to look away and be a little bit awed at how easily he transformed. Like an actor in a lifelong game of improv he adapted and reacted to his self made stage where some of us were extras and everyone else was the audience.

And looking down at my hand of cards I felt like there were no moves I could make in response, nothing to do but say

And wait for another round.

Alone on Cloud 9 (15)

Sorry it’s so short after all this time, I just needed to post something in the hopes of getting my momentum going on this story. I know the long absence went unexplained and I want to thank everyone for being so patient and understanding about it. These last few months have been a hectic ride, with school and a few of my family members going into surgery. It’s good to be back though, so without further ado I’ll let you read this long, long,

awaited chapter. =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 15

It was one of those mornings. The rare day when you wake up an hour before your alarm is set to go off and realize you still get a sweet few minutes to sleep. I resisted the temptation knowing it would only be harder waking up a second time, and besides, I felt wide awake. I couldn't help but glance over at my cell phone sitting on the bedside table and willing it to start vibrating with an incoming call. This was the third morning it had remained quiet, the third time I hadn't woken up to the familiar name on the callers display telling me to be ready in ten minutes. Not that I was keeping track or anything; that would just be pathetic.

I yanked something off a hanger and rushed into the bathroom to take a quick shower. I told myself it was because I didn't want to use up all the hot water and not because I was afraid of missing the call that wasn't coming. As if I would sink to that level. And when I checked the screen afterwards I swear it was just to make sure I wasn't suddenly running late.

.

All right, so maybe I missed him, it wasn't a crime, and while denial was a great place to be it wasn't solving my problems, or my apparent insanity.

Of course, I'd been telling myself that for days.

I snapped my phone shut for the third time in ten minutes, willing myself not to cave in and call Michael. So maybe we'd gotten into one little fight, friends fight. So what if he'd been avoiding me for a few days, friends don't always hang out. It was no big deal, he just needed space, and I wasn't about to be the clingy not-even-girlfriend kind of girl. No way.

I was just experiencing a temporary setback; obviously the universe was just running behind.

It’s not like I had any reason to panic, boys were like that, he'd get over it and things would go back to normal, no problem.

Shoving the phone in my pocket I threw what I needed into my bag, took my time applying a light coat of eye shadow to match my grey sundress and lazily dragged myself down the stairs to savor the overly polite clipped conversation in the kitchen. I was half way through an apple before realizing

I was supposed to be meeting Mandy at school early to compare our math assignment answers.

It took a moment for numbers on the clock to process, and then I was pushing my chair back with a clatter, slamming the door shut and jamming the key into the ignition, losing my breakfast somewhere along the way.

***

Have you ever walked into the middle a conversation that you know was about you? You know, that obvious tip off when frantic whispers stop abruptly and no one will meet your eye. When everyone looks guiltily off into the distance and laughs uncomfortably at a joke no one made? That was the feeling I got walking into school this morning.

No one seemed to be talking above a hushed whisper and the air itself seemed to slow down and settle around me like a heavy cloak.

The halls were surprisingly full with first period still half an hour away and everyone stood around in little groups of two or three whispering amongst themselves.

I stood by the doors uncertainly, wondering why no one laughed, and I nervously realized I was gathering a lot of attention.

Taking slow steps down the hall my footsteps seemed to echo, but then whatever spell had seemed to hold the hallway shattered into a dull roar of forced laughs and uneasy smiles.

I looked myself over self consciously, wondering if I'd done something completely embarrassing like left home without my pants on. I'd never heard of anyone actually doing that,

but the queer looks sent my way had me convinced something was off.

For an insane moment I felt like everyone could see right through my façade, somehow knew I'd waited by a phone for some guy to call, tried to dress better to be noticed, all those pathetic things I swore I'd never be the kind of girl to do. But no one knew about us, whatever 'us' was, that I could be sure of.

I had just finished closing my locker and turning back to the hall when I noticed someone blocking my path.

"Hey Arya!"

The girl standing in front of me had dark brown hair in loose curls that tumbled around her shoulders in a half hazard way, but that was the only messy thing about her. The pleated skirt and perfectly pressed button up shirt screamed classic schoolgirl, and I had to think desperately back to the first weeks of school to remember her name.

"Krista, hey"

A thick gold chain with a pendant hung around her throat and she fiddled with it so incessantly I wanted to snap my hand out and stop it.

"You're here early this morning."

I pulled my eyes up from the necklace, giving up on trying to make out what it was to meet her eyes.

"I'm supposed to meet Mandy in the cafeteria to go over our math assignments."

“The cafeteria?” Her eyes widened slightly and darted down the hallway in the direction I was planning to go. I couldn’t think why she looked so worried all of a sudden. Since it didn’t seem like she was going to elaborate I sidestepped around her to walk away.

“She’s not there!” Krista blurted out loudly.

A few heads turned in our direction at the outburst and I shifted uncomfortably under their gazes.

“Well that’s okay, I’ll just wait for her.”

“But—“

I turned to leave, itching to get away from all the sidelong glances being sent my way.

The walk down to the cafeteria, which should have only taken a minute, seemed to take hours. I only managed a few steps forward at a time before some stranger or another was stopping me to say hi. I swear I didn’t even have classes with half of them. I’d always regretted not getting to know more of my classmates better, but this was just ridiculous, what made me so interesting

I self-consciously looked myself over, convinced I had a sign stuck to my back or was wearing socks with sandals, something to explain all the unwelcome attention I was getting.

It was a relief when I finally found myself in front of the doors to the cafeteria and pushed them open with a sigh. A sigh that sounded incredibly loud compared to the deafening silence throughout the rest of the room.

I took in the scene slowly, people around the room frozen mid step, mouths half open in surprise, crumpled up handfuls of colored paper clenched in their fists.

And then I noticed it.

Really it was hard to miss, yet somehow I'd managed to overlook it until just now.

Papers. Papers

.

They littered the floor on the other end of the cafeteria and covered the back wall save for the few random patches that had already been pulled down.

At first I thought it was just some kind of senior class prank, there was one pulled every year around this time, but that didn't explain why everyone seemed to be looking directly at me.

For some reason the first line of that old Christmas poem started up in my head, seeming eerily appropriate and completely absurd.

But of course the similarities ended there.

I hesitantly took a step forward, hoping to break the tension, but if anything the silence just intensified, as if everyone had collectively sucked in a deep breath.

. I thought nervously.

As I got closer the words that blurred ineligibly together became clearer. I couldn't even begin to make sense of

what I was seeing, but two words stood out sharply from every paper.

My first thought was confusion. Where had I read that name before? And seconds later it came to me, the school newspaper, Amanda’s secret admirer.

Not that the revelation brought me any clarification. I couldn’t guess who the pen name belonged too, or why it warranted the troubled looks I was still getting. So I took a step closer.

The whole room seemed to freeze. It was like the floors had suddenly become slick with ice, trying to pull your feet out from under you and the walls were frosted in wispy tendrils of frozen air dropping the temperature drastically, and I couldn’t help but shiver involuntarily.

Time seemed to slow down and everything around just faded away, because all I could see now was the few inches of wall in front of me. The ticking of the nearby wall clock seemed deafeningly loud and excruciatingly slow.

.

You know that feeling you get when you go swimming and suddenly inhale a mouthful of water? And even as you surface and cough it all out you feel this frantic panic that you're still drowning?

That's what this felt like, like I couldn't breath, like there just wasn't enough air to fill my lungs and every breath was a struggle that both dried up my throat and burned all the way down.

.

Whatever spell had held my classmates in silence seemed to break and I could see their lips move in reassurance, questions, unintelligent babbling, I didn’t know really, because I couldn’t seem to hear a thing.

.

It was like my ears had been filled with cotton so that everything blended into a monotonous buzzing that crowded my mind and grew louder by the second, making it impossible to think, to process what was going on around me.

.

I could feel my heart beat racing, slamming against my rib cage, I could

the blood rushing to my head, leaving an uncomfortable smoldering heat tingling up and down my spine.

.

The words on the papers swam around me,

.

.

I could see them and yet they made no sense to me. Who would think that of me? A bitch? A stalker? Naive?

The lies oozing off the pages was some cruel trick, a sick joke that couldn’t possibly be referring to me, but the identical innocently smiling picture on all the pages showed otherwise.

And

, I remembered that picture. I took it myself, the phone held out in front of me while I squinted up at the screen, smiling like the lovesick schoolgirl I was and setting it as his wallpaper.

Just like that the desperate list of names I'd thought up, the list of people who could do something like this dwindled down to one, the most unlikely of all.

Michael Conner.

As if the thought alone had conjured him up out of thin air, I saw him. The lone calm face in a sea of uncertainly leaning back against a wall without a care in the world.

My vision seemed to narrow around me, blacking out the concerned oblivious faces until all I could see was him.

Michael Conner.

.

A million questions bubble up at once. How could he? Why

he?

My lips parted, ready to form the words, begging to ask the question out loud, but I snapped it shut just as fast. He just stood there, not breaking eye contact while I stared in disbelief, as if daring me to do something. Because we both knew I wouldn't, I never did. And that was the problem; I let him get away with everything.

In a rush things started coming back to me, how he expected me pick him up drunk when I could barely drive, without a license, the casual way he made fun of my friends and ignored the problems I had with my parents.

.

I stumbled back a few steps and just like that the world came back into focus, all eyes on me, waiting to see what I would do. Couldn’t they feel the tension stretching across the cafeteria? Couldn’t they feel the questions blaring out between us, filling every space around me?

What was I

to do? I wanted to scream and cry and hide all at once, but the urge that pressed most strongly was to run, to get away from the pitying stares and curious eyes.

So I ran.

The one thing the movies never tell you, is that it’s hard to run and cry at the same time. My feet veered wildly around, tripping over air and causing me to stumble repeatedly.

I only got as far as the back of the school before letting my legs give way beneath me and landing hard on my knees in the still damp grass.

But I knew I wasn’t.

My vision blurred from the tears as the last few minutes replayed over and over in my mind. My body wanted to feel a million emotions at once, hurt, anger, betrayal, grief, they pulled at me in a hundred directions, but all I could feel was numb.

Maybe it was the shock, the constant buzzing in my ears, the sight of him behind my eyes every time I blinked, but none of it seemed quite real. It was like one of those jigsaw puzzles with dozens of blue sky pieces that you knew were

supposed to go together but somehow couldn’t get to fit right.

I closed my eyes tightly, wishing I could open them and be somewhere else, anywhere else, I wished for a lot of things to be true, but most of all, I wished I was just imagining things when I finally opened my eyes only to see Michael Conner himself standing a few feet away from me.

Unfortunately the urge to run, the urge to do anything had deserted me for that awful numbness that seemed to be turning my body to lead, and all I could do was watch him walk casually towards me, hands in his pockets, acting for all the world like nothing was wrong.

I waited for him to say something, to rub it in or to gloat, isn’t that what people usually do when they rip your heart down and throw it at your feet? But he stayed silent, waiting for

.

This was my chance to yell and scream and tell him off, but I felt none of the anger I should have been. Half of me wanted to start laughing hysterically, because

I’d been so wrong about him it

to be funny. And the other half of me wanted to burst into tears because… well, I’d loved him.

When the words finally came out they weren’t at all what I planned.

“I just don’t understand. You seemed so into it.” Pathetic, weak, vulnerable, I knew my voice carried all those things,

and yet I couldn’t take them back now that they’d been said.

“Into what exactly?” He asked with a roll of the eyes.

“Into me.” I whispered, hating myself for letting him see how well he’d broken me.

I’d hoped for a denial, an excuse,

to prove me wrong, to prove it wasn’t him, but what I got was a scoff.

“Now why would you think that?”

“I—“

“You’re such a child Arya, did you really think I liked you?”

The look on my face must have been answer enough, and he responded with a light chuckle.

“You’re cute kid, but you’re just not my type…”

Was that supposed to be justification for what he’d just done? That I just

“You’re so naïve, a guy like me would never go for a girl like you, and we both know I can do so much better.”

Every word was like a physical blow, acid pouring out onto an already bleeding wound. I wanted to walk away, I’d even settle for crawling away, everything in me screamed to move, begging to be anywhere but here, and hadn’t I already been humiliated enough? But I was frozen, trapped in place by the words spilling out of his mouth, each more cruelly indifferent than the last.

“So all this time… you let me make a fool of myself, let me think you liked me… for what?”

“Maybe you should ask Mandy, you have her to thank for all this.”

And then I remembered his posts in the paper, the rare message from

addressed to Mandy that she always looked so upset at seeing.

. But it still made no sense, what feud could they possibly have? And what did it have to do with me?

I must have looked confused, and an icy glare transformed Michael’s face into an unfamiliar mask.

“You have no idea do you.”

The obvious venom in his voice caused me to flinch back, the angry look he leveled my way seemed to blame me for everything, and I realized in that moment he fully believed what he’d done in the cafeteria was something I deserved.

The thought slammed into me like a wall of ice, shattering on impact to bury burning cold shards into my heart.

He shook his head in disgust, like after all that I wasn’t even worth an explanation, and god help me, I had to desperately force myself not to cry, if only to prevent him the satisfaction.

Finally,

, he walked away, leaving me sitting there to watch his retreating back. I felt detached, like I was watching this

happen to me, like a scene from a book that I could picture sentence for sentence in my head, only this was real, and unlike the escape I usually found, these words held me prisoner, trapped in my own personal hell, a nightmare.

As his figure disappeared around the corner the shock wore off, and just like that my world came crashing down around me.

Brick by brick the fantastical castles of my mind were demolished, Knights in shining armor killed by thieves and brigands, and the one place my dreams came true was suddenly barren and empty, void of life and love and hope, and without that I was alone, more alone that I had ever been in my life, alone in the world I'd worked so hard to create for myself, alone on cloud 9.

Alone on Cloud 9 (16)

My my, people seem to be judging Mandy quite harshly, which was certainly a turn for the unexpected. Before you jump to too many conclusions you may want to hear her side of the story… when I decide to tell you what it is ;)

From here on out the story will remain in the present, but for this chapter any large sections in italics are flashbacks from the past. They should be pretty obvious, so hopefully you won’t get confused =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 16

*

You know that detached feeling you get like you're a bystander to your own life, a fly on the wall watching yourself go through the motions, like you’re just not all there. This was today, times ten, because today, not only was I not all there, most of me was stuck in the past, reliving the nightmare over and over again.

“Damn it Arya, will you pay attention!”

I snapped my eyes up, registering an annoyed and exasperated look on Charlie’s face as he pushed me out of

the way to get to the machine I was standing in front of. It was only then that I noticed the stream of coffee pouring into an overfilled cup and the pool of liquid that surrounded it.

“Sorry!”

He let out a heavy sigh and reached past me to flick off the machine.

“It’s

to early for this” he mumbled grumpily.

“Sorry, I guess I’m a little distracted today.” I replied sheepishly.

He mumbled something else I couldn’t hear and pulled the overflowing coffee cup out and towards the sink. I expected him to dump it all out but he only poured out a little and brought the cup to his mouth, taking a big gulp of the still scalding coffee. I waited for the caffeine to kick in, knowing Charlie without his morning overdose was not someone to mess with.

After downing half the cup like a shot of alcohol he finally put it aside and threw a wet dishtowel at me. I had to get my hands up quickly to avoid getting hit in the face but still got a shower of little drops across the front.

I shot him a dirty look but only got an innocent smile in return.

“Your mess Princess, clean it up.”

I grudgingly dropped the towel into the pool of black coffee and prodded it around with my finger, making a lame

attempt and wiping up the mess.

“Well this isn’t a good sign. You’re already in a foul mood and your stalker hasn’t even dropped by yet.”

I recoiled slightly at his choice of words.

“Oh, guess I spoke too soon, here comes the Wicked Bitch of the North, and her little dog too.”

“Have you ever actually watched the Wizard of Oz Charlie? You’ve got that

wrong.”

“Whatever, you know what I mean.”

“Morning loser.” Paige said casually as she slid up to the cash register.

“Morning slut.”

She smiled lazily at him, not the least bit offended by his greeting.

You know those times when you're trying desperately not to think of something and suddenly everything and everyone reminds you of it by seeming coincidence?

Like if you have to spend a Friday night with the family, and suddenly it's like everyone wants you to go to the movies, come hang out at Moonbeams, grab dinner, go to party and you think,

Or when you get one bad mark on a test and that's the week your parents sit you down for the get-good-grades-to-get-into-University lecture, and all the school councilors nag you to fill out another admissions form, write an extra

scholarship essay, take on another extracurricular even though they've never had any complaints before.

Or when its been two years to the day that you were humiliated in front of the whole school by the guy you were madly in love with and he just happens to be back in town, trying to get into your good graces, and it just so happens that the diner you work at has a frightening resemblance to the school cafeteria where it all went down. And of course he always sits in the same spot, in almost the same careless posture and you're hit with such a strong sense of déjà vu it almost makes you sick.

Personally, I think those days are the universes' way of telling you to suck it.

I'd only noticed a few days ago that the centre stage table matched that of the cafeteria, and now it seemed the whole of Moonbeams held a striking resemblance. Over there, back stage right, the corner table Wes and his rowdy friends had always occupied. The stage was like the back wall where all the fliers had been posted and later ripped down to be strew across the barren floor. And finally, the doors, the main doors of Moonbeams, placed just where those in the cafeteria had been, the same doors I'd run out of after the incident. The same doors Michael had run out of after the incident. How had I never noticed it before? And while I may not have believed much in destiny anymore, this was obviously some cruel trick by good old Fate himself.

Before I could even turn on the machines Charlie was bumping me out of the way and getting the drinks ready himself. Paige raised an eye at this but didn’t make a comment as she leaned against the counter, a rare thing for her. Mandy, as usual, hung in her shadow, fiddling with the hem of her shirt and refused to raise her eyes to meet mine.

I wanted to ask her,

As if feeling my gaze burning into her, Amanda finally looked up, and I realized that the flame was still gone. Whatever spark had gone out of her the day of the incident had never come back.

I had never blamed her for what happened between Michael and myself, I still didn't know how she even had anything to do with it aside from throwing the first French fry, but I

blame her for abandoning me, for casting me aside without so much as a

.

Unbidden, Michael's bitter words came back to me.

Was it so easy for her to do so?

And yet, I might be able to forgive her for it if she would just tell me

.

I wrung out the coffee soaked dishrag in the sink, my back to the room while Charlie handed off their drinks. I was still needlessly wringing it out when Charlie cleared his throat behind me.

I turned around to face him, attempting a faint smile.

"What's bothering you?"

"Nothing." I answered immediately.

"Please, you haven't overfilled a coffee cup in all the time you've worked here, not even the first day."

I grimaced slightly, hating to admit I was half reliving the incident today. Most days I was fine, some days I didn't even think about it, but occasionally, it hit me so hard I thought I was drowning in the stacks of colored paper used to cover the cafeteria wall.

It didn't help that Michael was in town, it didn't help that today was

day it had happened, but I still should have been over it.

Sure, it helped that I had

confronted Michael about it, but his was an ongoing problem I still needed to solve, and that still left Mandy and the cafeteria I hadn't stepped for into for two years.

Realizing Charlie was still waiting for an answer I shrugged, "I just have a lot on my mind."

He raised an eyebrow but didn't push for further details, which at the moment I loved him for.

For the rest of my shift I tried not to be distracted by the past, or dwell too much on the set up of Moonbeams, though I itched to go out to the room and push a few tables around to change it's uncanny resemblance to the cafeteria. I also tried not to dwell on the fact that I would actually have to go in there today, but that was a lost cause, it was almost all I could think of.

When Evan had told me about the senior class prank a few of our classmates had come up with and begged me to help out I couldn't turn him down. It was a tradition at this school, one I definitely wanted to be a part of, and besides, Wes would be there, though I told myself that wasn't the reason I was going.

Well, not the whole reason.

Either way, it didn’t process until much later that we would be meeting in the cafeteria, the only place in the school big enough to accommodate what we were planning to do. A part of me reasoned that it wasn’t too late to back out, that nearly the whole senior class would be there and they wouldn’t miss one more person. But I wanted to look back and be able to remember it, know that I had helped make it happen, and again, Wes would be there, even if he

acting indifferent around me lately.

Before I could talk myself out of it I drove down to the school, arriving long enough after we were supposed to meet so that I wouldn’t have an audience watching me hyperventilate in front of the door. I parked two blocks down the street from the school and angled around to the back door that Evan claimed would be unlocked. It was.

I slipped inside, thinking how weird it was to be sneaking into school on a Sunday. I savored walking down the empty halls with no one around to give me sideways glance or stop in the middle of a conversation that was obvious about me.

In a few short months I could leave all of this behind, the drama the rumors, the memories that haunted me around every corner for the fresh start I badly wanted, and the thought alone had me walking faster, feeling more confident that I could overcome my irrational fear of the cafeteria. As if I needed that hanging over my head for the rest of my life,

Of course, brave words didn’t mean much when I was actually standing in front of the doors.

You know that feeling you get right before walking into a haunted house? That anxious bubbling in the pit of your

stomach as you try to brace yourself for what lies on the other side?

Sure, you expect a few blood curdling screams, some decapitated heads, cobwebs and strobe lights and something jumping out at you, maybe even the jerk crouching in a corner ready to stick out his hand to grab your ankle. You may expect all those things, but it doesn't make you any less apprehensive about pushing through, it doesn't stop the sudden speeding up of your heart or the rapid breaths you're suddenly taking or the frightened squeak you try to pass off as a cough to your friends. And the cafeteria was like a haunted house tailed specially to me.

But still my arms hung limply by my sides.

The problem was, I hadn't been inside the cafeteria for two years, avoiding it at all costs in the fear that it would overwhelm me in all the old memories, afraid that it would break me all over again. I'd built up the suspense for far too long. But how could I claim to be over anything when I couldn't even go back into the room where it happened?

Truthfully, what we were planning didn't seem very prank-like to me, but at least then no one would get in trouble for it.

The only

was that everyone was meeting in the cafeteria.

I was still standing in front of the door when someone cleared their throat behind me.

Grateful for the distraction I turned around with a smile, which only faltered slightly when I saw Wes and Evan

standing behind me.

A jolt went through me as my gaze immediately fell on Wes, taking in his well worn black jeans and dark green hoodie, the way his hair fell messily over his eyes as he looked at his feet, how he hands fiddled with something in his pocket and his face turned just the fainted shade of red as if he knew I was looking at him. And as soon as I noticed all those details I realized I was a complete goner.

Evan glanced quickly between us and just from that I knew what he was about to do and silently begged him with my eyes not to leave me alone with Wes.

It’s not that I didn’t want to be left out here with him, it’s just that things had been off between us all week long and things were obviously awkward. He wasn’t avoiding me exactly, but he never acted more than polite when we did run into each other.

“There better be coffee inside.” Evan said with a fake yawn and brushed past me to slip into the cafeteria, giving me a pointed look on the way in.

.

I wanted to blame Michael for screwing this up as well with his strategically planned

, but I’d been the one stupid enough to respond without thinking to his baiting and say ‘no’, so it was up to me to fix this, only I couldn’t think how. The guy drove every rational thought out of my head just by standing there.

“Hey” Was my brilliant conversation starter.

I was hoping he’d take it to mean

, but that was a lot to convey in only one syllable.

He finally met my eyes and his lips turned up into a barely there hesitant smile, but at least it wasn’t forced, and I told myself it was because he

understood the hidden message behind my words.

Well, word.

“Hey”

“Hey”

He shook his head slightly and laughed. “You already said that.”

“Oh, I uh—right” I mumbled, feeling my face het up slightly. Apparently all the progress I’d made in intelligent conversation while we were friends had been wiped out and I was now back to

setting.

“So, are you actually planning on going in?” His voice was curious, and maybe just a little bit amused, not skeptical or disbelieving like I expected it to be.

“Yes, I was just… waiting for the right moment to make my entrance.”

“

, I know what you were really waiting for,” He said with a smirk.

I realized with a jolt he was also back to talking normally with me and had to stop myself from doing something

completely embarrassing.

“You do?” I winced internally at how dreamy my voice sounded.

“Yup. You’re waiting for a nice strong man to hold open the door for you, but you’ll just have to make do with me.” He said playfully.

I opened my mouth to protest his implication that he

the nice strong man I was waiting for, but the words dried up in my throat as his hand reached out to push open the door.

I felt myself flinch back slightly and glanced over at him in slight panic, but he was still smiling like there was no doubt I would stroll right in, and somehow I couldn’t stand the thought of disappointing him. Again.

Besides, if he was going in there, I definitely wanted to be there to. So despite the clanging bells of alarm going off in my head I mocked a slight curtsey and walked into the cafeteria for the first time in two years to the sound of his gentle laugh.

That was soon forgotten of course as I faced the room that had haunted me for so long. It was like a domino effect as first one person, and then another stopped what they were doing to turn and look at me.

*

I blinked out of my daze and took a few deep breaths to steady myself. My eyes immediately flashed to the empty center table, and then to the back wall. For just a second I

imagined seeing the wall covered in colorful paper, but then it was gone, nothing but a plain off-white wall.

To everyone’s credit, they only gaped at me for a few seconds before going back to blowing up balloons, and that’s when I remembered what I was actually here for.

Our goal was to fill the upstairs hallway with hundreds of balloons, and everyone in the senior class was hard at work to make that happen. There were two helium tanks in a corner where a few people worked so that we could fill up the hallway right to the top, but everyone else was using their lungs to blow them up the old fashioned way.

The balloons were in our school colors, green and gold, and each one had

written on it in fancy graffiti font. Already the cafeteria had tons of balloons rolling around the floors or tied together in the case of the helium ones. I couldn’t even imagine what the faces of the staff and students would be tomorrow when they opened the doors to the upstairs hallway and dozens of balloons started spilling out around them.

A loud ‘POP’ from behind shocked me so bad I pitched forward into Wes. He threw out his arm to catch me and laughed at the startled expression I was no doubt wearing.

“You better get used to that, it will be happening a

tomorrow.”

, now I understood where the prank part of this came in. We made our way carefully to the corner of the gym were Evan was sitting on a table with a mound of deflated balloons around him.

“Better get started or we’re going to be here all night.” He said, pushing a fresh new bag towards me.

I hopped up next to him with a smile, completely over being annoyed with him for abandoning me and ripped open the packet. I tried to hide my goofy grin when Wes settled in next to me, sitting much closer than he needed to—not that I was complaining.

I’d gotten through two balloons and was picking up my third when I noticed Wes struggling to tie a knot in what I assumed was still his first balloon and turning red in the face from the effort.

Something about the sight seemed so adorably funny I just couldn’t stop myself from laughing.

Wes looked up and made a face at me before pointing the round end of the balloon at me and letting go, causing it to hit me in the face before fluttering around to let the rest of the air out.

I must have looked really surprised at the action because he smirked at me for the second time today.

I huffed at him and threw another balloon in his lap.

“Now you just have to start again.”

I started blowing up my own balloon, only to have it pulled out of my mouth a few seconds later, the hole pinched shut to keep the air in, by Wes as he handed me his fully inflated one with the other hand. The message was pretty clear.

I rolled my eyes, but still let my lips tug up into a smile as I took it from him and decided I liked this new confident Wes. Evan started handing me his to tie as well, claiming I was

getting off too easy and we fell into an easy pattern that occasionally broke out into smacking each other with balloons.

Grace showed up two hours later and barely batted an eyelash at seeing me in the cafeteria, her eyebrow did raise up though when Wes pulled another half inflated balloon from between my lips and handed me his own. I could feel my face heating up, knowing what she was probably thinking, that we were flirting. I knew for a fact we weren't but the look in her eyes told me I'd have a hard time convincing her of it, and I knew I'd probably have to sit through a few I-told-you-so's at some point, but it was worth it to be back to normal with him.

Even though we were there for hours, the night seemed to be over too soon. We only had a few more trips to make putting the last few loads of balloons carefully into the hallway and we'd be done.

"I vote we go get some coffee." Evan announced to the three of us.

"

coffee? Are you not planning to sleep tonight?" I asked in disbelief. While the rest of us were nearly falling asleep standing up, Evan still looked fresh and awake it made me want to punch him.

"You are

overruled." Wes said from beside him, raising a hand to slap him upside the head.

"Come on, the night is young, live a little!"

“Can we vote him off the island or something?” Grace mumbled in annoyance.

Evan gave us all a collective glare and stomped off ahead of us managing to look offended and wounded all at once. The boy was truly an art in himself.

Wes rolled his eyes and said goodnight before running to catch up with Evan.

Just before the doors to the cafeteria swung shut behind us I took it all in one last time.

I’d always blamed Michael for ruining my life, but was my life really so bad? Without that day I never would have met Grace, I never would have gotten over Michael and let myself notice Wes. Wes, the guy I’d secretly had a crush on since the tenth grade but never dared fall for, and yet here I was, hurling towards the ground not even aware that I’d jumped, wanting to risk everything all over again.

I thought I’d lost so much, never daring to pick up the pieces of my shattered illusions, but maybe I’d just grown up. It hadn’t been like the books. After the incident I couldn't just flip the pages and let months of my life go by, swallowed in some never ending pit of grief. I had fought every day to pick myself up and keep moving, whatever the cost. Sure, maybe I’d lost a few things alone the way, a glass slipper here, an enchanted rose there, but I wasn't the heroine in some tragic love story, because the story didn’t just

with the incident.

It happened then, this sudden clarity as the door closed heavily on the cafeteria and everything that happened there. Everything comes down to little moments in life. Little

sparks of time that fizzle up and sputter out in the span of seconds and somehow in that time you've made a decision, one that changes everything. I recognized it now, one of those life-changing moments; I didn't want to spend the rest of my life hating Michael Conner.

Alone on Cloud 9 (17)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 17

“This is the one.”

Grace gazed into the mirror with a look of complete wonder on her face, twirling back and forth with handfuls of silky material clutched in her hands. It was adorable the first time, now, not so much.

“Really Grace? Because you’ve said that about the last thirteen dresses you’ve tried on.”

“No seriously, this is the one.” I impatiently got up from my seat and turned over the price tag attached to the zipper.

“It also costs more than your next three years worth of university tuition.”

“Oh.” Her face fell into a slight frown and she wondered back into the change room to try on the other four dresses she’d picked out that would no doubt also be ‘the one’.

“Maybe if you actually tried something on you wouldn’t be so bored.” She called from inside.

“What’s the big deal? We’ll be wearing our grad gowns overtop, no one will be able to see your dress anyway.”

She pushed open the door and gave me an exasperated look. “It’s for

the ceremony obviously. You know we’ll be keeping these pictures for the

It’s like getting married.”

“This is

like getting married Grace.”

“Hello? We walk down an aisle, we get a diploma, it’s a once in a life time thing here Arya.”

With an exaggerated roll of the eyes at my obvious skepticism she strutted in front of the mirror and let out a quiet gasp.

“Oh my god, this is totally—“

“The one?”

I dodged the sparkly pink purse that came flying towards my head and heard it hit the floor with a loud thud.

One of the sales ladies gave us an annoyed look and Grace blushed red as she rushed around the chair I was sitting on and picked up the purse, yelling out a very unconvincing ‘it slipped’.

Maybe if I was lucky she’d call security and have us kicked out.

After a few more moments of staring in the mirror Grace slumped into a seat next to mine, her dress puffing out around her. “I just don’t see why you’re not more excited about this.” She complained, sounding genuinely perplexed.

“There’s not a whole lot to be excited about really. We’re graduating, whop-de-do.”

“I thought you

to be out of high school.”

“I do. It just feels like everything’s unfinished, like I’m leaving too many loose ends behind.”

We sat in silence for a minute until Grace slapped her hand against the armrest, startling me out of my thoughts. “Well do something about it then! School’s not over yet.”

“Pretty much, there’s only a month left.”

“So? A lot can happen in a month, hell a lot can happen in a

around here.”

I smiled slightly and nodded at the dress she currently seemed to be drowning in. “Well, I doubt a

is going to make a difference.”

“Please, it

will. Obviously you underestimate the power of the perfect dress.”

“Really? Enlighten me then.” I said with a grin.

“Simple. Just

how far Wes’s jaw will drop when you show up in some gorgeous dress.”

I felt my face start to heat up and halfheartedly smacked her on the arm. “That’s not going to happen.” I mumbled.

“Picture how jealous Michael will be.” She continued, ignoring me.

“Why would Michael be—“

“Picture how

Paige will be when she see’s both of the guys she’s after fighting over you.”

“They wouldn’t be,” I protested.

She scoffed and pulled herself up from the chair, not even bothering to respond.

“Seriously, none of that could possibly happen.”

“Well, I guess you’ll never know, since you can’t be bothered to try…”

I opened my mouth, meaning to tell her she was wrong, but god help me, all I could think about was Wes. She just

to put that thought in my head. As if he wasn’t in on my mind enough. So all I managed to say was “I couldn’t afford any of these dresses anyway.”

She smirked triumphantly and pointed out the store. “There’s a great thrift shop at the end of the hall. Try there and meet me at the food court in an hour.”

“You still need an

”

“Just go.”

I held up my hands in surrender and walked out the door, heading down the hall like she directed. I still wasn’t completely sold on the dress thing, but maybe it was worth a shot. It couldn’t hurt, at the very least.

I strolled down the mall, which was surprisingly empty for a Saturday afternoon. Most people were probably sleeping in, which made me wonder how I ended up getting dragged here before the doors had even opened.

“What, you’re just going to creep along behind me and not even say hi?”

I whipped my head up in surprise, a grin already forming as I recognized the voice.

“Hey Evan.”

I waited for the usual smile in return, but instead he took a few steps towards me, shifting the bags he was carrying to one hand and placed it on my shoulder, a serious expression on his face.

“Really Hobbit, this obsession’s got to stop, I mean, it was cute in the beginning, but if you’ve resorted to following me around in the mall—“

I cut off his speech with a jab in the ribs and his serious expression dissolved into a bright smile as he yanked me into a hug.

I squirmed around, trying not to be squished between him and the bags but it was a lost cause. When he finally

released me I glared unsuccessfully at his still grinning face.

“Sometimes I really hate you, you know that?”

“Yes, but the rest of the time you love me.” He teased, making kissy faces.

I shook my head at him, knowing it was useless to say anything.

“Evan hunny!”

The funny faces stopped abruptly to be replaced by a grimace.

Shelly walked up to her stepson excitedly, going on about some sale to Evan and planting a quick kiss on his cheek before noticing I was standing behind him.

“Arya! Didn’t see you there dear. You haven’t been by the house in a while though I swear it seems like you’re always around with how much Evan talks about you.”

I raised an eyebrow at Evan, who just shrugged—or tried to, since he was simultaneously trying to wipe the streak of lipstick staining his cheek off with the side of his arm.

“I would be over more often, but since Evan never invites me…” I trailed off pretending to look hurt.

“Hey, don’t pin this all on me, you know where I live, you’re just supposed to show up.” He stated, as if it was the logical thing to do, which for Evan it probably was.

“Well, there are a few more shops I want to get to before the crowd shows up, but it was lovely seeing you, be sure to ‘show up’ at our house sometime dear.”

“Mom, I’m hanging out with Ary for a while.” He called out to her retreating back.

“Fine, just meet me in the food court in a few hours.” She called back without turning around, completely missing Evan’s exasperated look, which he then directed at me.

“Aww, you came shopping with your mom?” I teased.

“Someone had to hold the bags.” He defended, lifting up the bags in both hands to make his point.

“That’s

manly.” I said sarcastically.

“Shut up.”

“You still have lipstick on your face.”

He grimaced and lifted an arm up again, once again trying to rub it off and missing the streak completely.

I watched in amusement for a few seconds before pushing his hand out of the way stepping closer to wipe it off myself. I always seemed to forget how much taller than me he was until moments like this, when I had to look way, way up just to see his face.

He smiled down at me, a rare grateful smile that had none of the usual teasing curve to it, and I found myself smiling back before he went and ruined the nice moment.

“You know you

have to get over this infatuation you have with me, I mean I know you find me devastatingly handsome but—“

I lifted a hand to cover his mouth, and whatever else he said came out as a mumble through my fingers. I rolled my eyes when he finally shut up and dropped my hand.

“You know sometimes—“

“You hate me.” He finished with a grin.

I laughed and made a heart shape with my hands, “but the rest of the time I love you.”

I turned away to walk down the hall and heard Evan fall in step beside me. I glanced at him sideways, wondering why he was so oddly silent rather than gloating about what I’d just said.

“You know you’re my best girl-who’s-a-friend right?” He asked suddenly.

“Right… and you’re my best boy-who’s-a-friend.” I replied back, wondering where this was going.

He stopped suddenly and turned to face me. “Then don’t get mad because I have to ask, is there anything,

left between you and Michael.”

My mouth opened and closed a few times, completely caught off guard at the question. Apparently Evan took this as a yes though, since his shoulders slumped and he turned away with a quiet ‘oh’.

I grabbed onto his shoulder, which was not an easy thing to do since he was so tall, and pulled him back to face me again.

“Nothing. There’s nothing.” I replied firmly, and as I said it, I realized it was the truth.

Evan seemed to think about it for a moment, and then smiled slightly and nodded.

“Good.”

“Okay… are you going to tell me

you needed to ask that?”

“Nope.”

“Seriously?” I asked in disbelief.

He smirked at me, knowing I hated secrets.

“So where are we going exactly?”

This time it was my turn to smirk, and I pointed at the store we’d just walked in front of.

“I need to buy a grad dress.”

“More shopping?” He groaned.

I walked into the store, heading straight for the back where a tattered sign indicated the women’s section. I still wasn’t completely sold on the whole buy-a-dress thing, but if it annoyed Evan I was all for it. He deserved it for asking that kind of question and not even telling me why.

He trailed in slowly and dumped the two handfuls of bags into a chair by the change room before turning to look at the rows of clothing in front of us.

“Right, let’s make this fast so I can get out of here.”

“For once, I agree with you.” I mumbled, staring glumly at the rack of dresses in front of me.

“Found one!” Evan exclaimed, pulling out the first thing that he could grab. At least, I hope that’s why he picked it up, because if he thought

would be the one I seriously had to question our friendship.

The dress he was holding out was a very fluorescent orange, and while the cut of the dress may have been redeemable, that color could not possibly look good on anyone.

He seemed to read my expression easily enough, since his smile deflated only a little before he put the dress back, but I felt the need to say something anyway. “Does your stepmom buy your clothes for you? Because you have

sense of fashion.”

Evan swelled his chest up, managing to look both offended and conceited at the same time.

“I’ll have you know I’ve been dressing myself since high school, and I have a

sense of fashion.”

“Really, since high school? That’s

an accomplishment.”

With a determined glare he went back to the rack of dresses, flipping through them quickly and carefully, pausing at a few and then moving past them.

I abandoned by own row of dresses to watch him, getting more bemused by the second as he studied each one before

sliding past it until finally his face lit up with a triumphant smile and he yanked out the dress, handing it to me with a smug expression.

The gauzy material slipped through my fingers like water, and the pale blue color just added to that illusion. Without even trying it on I could tell the fabric would ripple with every step.

“You love it, I win.” He declared.

“It might look terrible on.” I protested, though I knew it wouldn’t.

“Try it on then.”

He flopped into another chair beside his bags, motioning towards the change room.

I let out a loud sigh, as if that simple task was a huge burden, but I’ll admit, I was a little excited.

The dress slipped on easily, a sweetheart neckline with capped sleeves over the shoulders and a skirt that fell just above my knees.

I walked out of the change room for approval, trying not to be totally girly and twirling around in it—that could wait until the privacy of my bedroom.

Evan let out a satisfied ‘ha’ and nodded. “Like I said, I win, and you look great, and it only took fifteen minutes!”

“You’re right, I should bring you shopping more often.”

With the dress finally picked out and time to spare we wondered around the store for a while. I let Evan lead the

way, which was really like letting a six year old loose in a store unsupervised. He insisted on walking into every store that had anything remotely interesting in the shop window, only to walk out a minute later because something across the hall caught his attention.

Finally it was time to head towards the food court to meet Grace, and Evan and I parted ways.

“Did you find something?” We asked at the same time.

Grace laughed and nodded in excitement. “It’s dark green with black lace leafs along the neck, but you’ll just have to wait and see it,

it won’t leave me broke for the next three years.” She added with a giggle.

“There was nothing like that in the pile when I left.”

“No, it caught my eye at the last second actually, just when I was about to give up hope. What does yours look like?”

“Well, you’ll also have to wait to see it, but it’s a bluish silver color, simple and pretty.”

Alone on Cloud 9 (18)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 18

For once it was a slow shift, Moonbeams seemed to be under a trance. The few people who were here seemed to be either passed out on a couch asleep or hunched over a cup of steaming coffee, blinking their eyes in that slow way just before your head starts nodding when you can hardly stay awake.

Clearly finals studying was underway for the university crowd, and while mine weren't too far away either I had yet to crack open a textbook. Exams seemed a million miles away.

I didn't feel all that anxious about it until Wes shouldered his way into the café, a pile of books in his hands and a bulging backpack thrown over his shoulder.

My heart plummeted slightly as he looked over at the main floor for a table, and then skyrocketed back up when he made for my counter instead.

"Is this your new study spot now?" I asked incredulously as he dumped the armful of books over the counter that separated us.

“Don’t judge me, finals are coming up.”

“Yeah, in a

.”

“Laugh now, but in two weeks when you start cramming it won’t be nearly as funny. For you that is,

think it’s hilarious.”

I threw the rag I was holding at him, but it didn’t even come close to hitting its mark before he snatched it out of the air and smirked at me.

He slumped down into the barstool across the counter and pulled the daunting pile of books in front of him.

At least I wasn’t the only one distracted though, since we caught each other’s eye more than once before quickly turning away to our own work.

I could have happily gone though my whole shift that way, but silence never lasted long around here.

"I'll have the usual babe."

I felt myself instantly put on guard, not because I was at all phased by smirking face in front of me, but because I was determined not to say anything stupid with Wes sitting right there. Again.

"You don't

a usual here Michael." I said with a roll of the eyes. And though the words were meant to be slightly snarky, my voice came out cheerful, and I couldn’t seem to wipe out the

faint smile from my face, but I knew it had nothing to do with Michael.

"Oh." He looked confused for a moment, recovering from the delivery of his not so smooth line, or maybe he was thrown off by the usual lack of hostility in my voice.

"How about a white chocolate mocha?" I asked cheerfully, and went about making the drink before he even nodded his agreement.

Clearly playing nice was something I should have tried a long time ago, it seemed to throw him off that I was no longer reacting predictably to his usual taunts.

Still, Michael wasn't one to be out for long, and as I waited for the milk to finish steaming I saw him lean an arm against the counter, tilt his head towards me and smile, suddenly turning on the charm.

I was satisfied to realize that even with my decision made not to hate him I was blissfully immune to whatever desperate weapons he had left in his arsenal.

But then, how could I not be? Seeing both guys I used to have a crush on side by side, I didn’t even have to think about which one I liked better.

I slid the mocha across the counter, even adding in a ‘have a nice day’ while I set up the next drink, before noticing Michael was still standing there.

“Something wrong with your drink?” I asked politely, though I knew it was perfect.

Michael frowned slightly and glanced over at Wes, who was still huddling over his books, before leaning in across the

counter.

“We need to talk.” He murmured, like he was trying not to be overheard, though we both knew it was impossible for Wes not to hear from that close, and I had a feeling this was just another one of Michael’s games.

Obviously he hadn’t gotten the memo that I was done playing.

I pretended to think about it and shook my head. “Can’t I’m pretty busy today.”

He looked around the room, taking in the obviously unfilled chairs, not to mention the lack of a line, but I had a feeling he wouldn’t dispute the fact with Wes sitting right there.

“It won’t take long.” He said with a strained smile. “I have a feeling it’s something you’ve been waiting to hear.”

Damn. Now I was curious. What the hell was I waiting to hear from Michael? I might have caved then if I didn’t notice Wes tense up from behind his pile of books, and I knew then that whatever he had to say, there was no way I was tipping the fragile balance of whatever was going on here.

“Maybe some other time.” I responded vaguely, trying to sound uninterested.

Michael looked annoyed, his usually unruffled demeanor slipping for just a second before taking on a strained smile that I’m sure only I could catch.

“Fine. Another time then, but don’t think I’ll forget.” He whispered.

As he walked away things seemed tense. I knew Wes couldn’t break the silence without admitting he’d been listening, and

couldn’t break the silence without pretending he hadn’t been listening. It seemed like a rather confusing dilemma until the problem was solved for us.

I made a face at Evan and he cracked up laughing, unable to hold a straight face for more than a few seconds.

"Classy." I replied back flatly, wondering why he hadn’t jumped in sooner if he’d been around long enough to hear that.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist." He said without even a hint of remorse. I picked up the same as I’d tried to throw at Wes and chucked it at Evan. I was pleased to see it hit its mark, but it didn’t exactly have the effect I was going for since Evan turned towards Wes, nearly hidden behind his pile of books, without missing a beat.

"Dude, heard of a table?"

“And miss out on all the action back here? No way.” He said it jokingly, but I knew he was referring to Michael, and by the look on Evan’s face, he did too.

“So, did you hear back from MU?”

I froze in the middle of mixed the next order, my attention completely on Wes. Miller University was the leader in nanotechnology and only a one-hour flight away, it also happened to be in the same city as Arough University where I’d applied.

After a few tense seconds Wes grinning brightly and nodded. “I got the acceptance letter yesterday.”

“And you didn’t tell me!?” Evan practically yelled, half excited and half annoyed; my sentiments exactly.

Wes shrugged, looking sheepish. “I didn’t want to say anything unless I was sure I could afford going there.”

“We should celebrate!” I declared enthusiastically.

I hoped that no one would notice the slight strain in my voice. I hoped they couldn’t just look at me and tell that my envelope was shoved under my bed unopened. It had come in the mail two days ago, that thick brown envelope that I desperately wanted to be my ticket out of here, but didn’t have the nerve to open.

“I’d love to, but there isn’t exactly anywhere to go around here.” Wes said with a laugh.

“We could… hang out at my house?” The words came out a squeak, and I instantly regretted them. I desperately hoped for a second that no one had heard, but it was painfully obvious by their suddenly brightened faces that they had, and actually thought it was a good idea.

I almost laughed. Not the this-is-going-to-be-great kind of laugh but the hysterical and slightly manic laugh of a person trying to pretend the night wouldn’t be a train wreck.

I knew no one would pass up the opportunity to come, this was, after all, my house. Practically sacred ground considering none of my friends had ever stepped over the threshold.

My eyes involuntarily flashed to Michael across the room the one person who

been to my house,

.

But this was bound to be different I told myself, these were actually my friends.

“Well, that’s definitely a once in a lifetime offer, can’t pass that up.” Evan said, no doubt fully aware I was already having second thoughts.

“I don’t know… I have a lot of studying to do.” I could tell he wanted to come though, and that he knew as well as Evan I was regretting it, though I know I didn’t tell him about my parent situation. Evan must have decided to share that story.

“Dude, don’t even be that lame, we’re celebrating for

, and you know you want to meet Ary’s elusive parents.”

“They won’t mind?” He asked, turning the full force of his smoldering green eyes at me.

“Of course not.” I said confidently, because what else was I going to say with him looking at me like that?

Truthfully, I had no idea if they would mind. This was kind of unexplored territory, I’d never asked to have friends over before.

“Great! It’s settled then. We can go after your shift.”

“Sure?”

Evan slapped Wes across the shoulder and picked some of the books of the counter.

“You, table.” He ordered, pointing across the room.

Wes reluctantly got up and gathered the rest of his stuff before shrugging apologetically, and with one lingering glance followed Evan towards a table on the main floor.

I kept my eyes on the boys, noticing what seemed to be a glare exchanged between Evan and Michael as they passed. I didn’t even want to know what was going on there.

Of course, then it hit me that two boys were coming over. To

house.

I immediately ran into the back room to pull out my cell and text Grace, telling her what had just happened and begging her to come.

How I managed to go from not wanting anyone near my house to trying to enlist more people was beyond me, but I couldn’t brave have the guy of my dreams in

house without some girl back-up.

Quickly calling my mom I let her know we were having a few people over. She seemed perplexed more than anything, and I had to wonder if all these years she just thought I was too antisocial to

any friends to invite over. Not that that was exactly far off the mark.

I hung up the phone feeling slightly calmer and went back out to the counter. Mandy was waiting in line, shifting

awkwardly from foot to foot as Paige babbled away on the phone to someone about some party tonight.

I set up Paige's order first, hoping to get rid of her sooner, and was glad when she snapped up her coffee the second I set in down, ignoring me as she made her way to a table.

Mandy smiled sheepishly up at me, and I couldn't help but want to strike up a conversation.

"So, you guys are going to a party tonight?"

"

is going to party tonight, apparently I didn't make the guest list."

Amanda didn't seem all that bothered by this, but I couldn't help but feel indignant on her behalf at how rude it was of Paige to talk about a party her supposed best friend wasn't even invited to, which it probably what prompted what I said next.

"I'm having some people over tonight, want to come?" I said it on impulse, and Mandy looked beyond surprised, but if I was already having so many people over one more couldn't hurt. Besides, I bet it had been a long time since she'd hung out with anyone other that Paige.

"I… are you sure no one will mind?" She asked quietly.

I felt so sad for her right then in that one line I didn't for a second regret inviting her.

"Of course not, we're leaving after my shift."

She hesitated for a while and then nodded before picking up her drink and following after Paige.

Alone on Cloud 9 (19)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 19

I thought I'd at least get to make a good first impression, I'd even naively convinced myself that things wouldn't be so bad, but as usual the universe was out to spite me. As the door swung open I couldn't just hear my parents arguing, no, that would be too easy. They were standing right there in the hallway, my dad's face just starting to take on the red flush of anger, my mother's scarf draped unevenly around her neck, both of them gesturing wildly as their briefcases swung half-hazardly around in their hands.

. I thought bitterly.

Who knows how long they would have been at it if the door hadn't been swung shut by Evan, who, in typical Evan fashion, was completely oblivious to the verbal smack-down happening centre stage at Chateau de Simon's, and was busy humming what sounded like a Christmas Carol.

And then came the silence. The abrupt and complete stop of all sound and movement, aside from his humming, which took a moment and a jab in the ribs to die down.

I saw the embarrassment register on the faces of my parents as they simultaneously lifted a hand to smooth down their hair and plaster on cheery smiles as if they hadn’t just been caught like two kids with their hands in the cookie jar.

I had that surge of panic again, worried that everyone would suddenly think differently of me, that I’d be

girl, with the parent’s who are always fighting. I worried this would be a Michael Conner all over again, but not one pitying gaze was sent my way. They all seemed completely unfazed, if a little embarrassed, to have walked in on a bad situation, but I didn’t feel the need to go crawl under a rock for the rest four years, which had to be progress.

It came as no surprise that it was Wes who broke the tension, walking casually up to my parents and sticking a hand out to introduce himself like he hadn’t just seen two adults bickering like middle school pre-teens.

After that all my friends crowded around to say hello while my parents smiled and nodded in something of a daze. Mandy stood off to the side, hovering just on the edge, and I dragged her over to meet them too.

I was glad the boys hadn’t said anything about her tagging along, though Grace had given me a very confused look that I was sure would require an explanation at some point.

After a few minutes everyone seemed to relax and I decided this wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it would be. Sure, it was a rough start, but I figured it could only go up from here.

My dad picked up the phone to order pizza’s and my mom disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me to lead everyone

into the living room.

Evan walked up to the cabinet with all our movies, rummaging through the shelves as if he'd been here a dozen times and calling Wes over to help pick something out.

Mandy moved to the far end of the room, taking a seat at the edge of the sofa and Grace followed, sitting on the other end.

Not wanting to be stuck in the middle of my new and old best friends I claimed a spot on the second couch.

After arguing over a movie choice for a good ten minutes the boys finally decided on something and stuck it in the player.

Evan walked over and sank down between Grace and Mandy, flipping both arms out around their shoulders.

"I could definitely get used to this."

Grace rolled her eyes at him and pushed his arm off, earning a hurt look, while Mandy smiled slightly shaking her head. I shot him a grateful look. If anyone could make Amanda feel less left out, it was Evan.

Of course, that meant Wes was left sitting next to me, and though I was far from complaining, I couldn't even register what movie we were watching with him sitting so close, spreading out to take up half the couch in that way only boys can manage.

It was a relief when the doorbell rang since my inner swooning girl was on the verge of passing out, and I practically jumped off the chair to answer it.

My dad beat me there, pulling out his wallet and waving away my offer to pay. When I walked back into the room with the stack of steaming boxes I was glad to see everyone looked comfortable hanging out together. Evan seemed to be flirting with both my friends at once, getting mostly exasperated glares and the occasional reluctant smile.

While everyone was busy attacking the boxes I set on the table I slipped out of the room, making my way upstairs.

The noise of the TV gradually dimmed as I got further away until it was a just a slight buzz in the background. I knelt on the floor by my bed, digging around underneath for the brown envelope I'd shoved under there two days ago.

Instead my hands landed on the memory box. I pulled it out slowly, tracing a finger over the quotes I'd so carefully picked out and written down. I opened the lid, seeing all the memories I'd deemed worth keeping from three years ago, things I thought I never wanted to forget, and then I realized, I didn't really want to keep them anymore.

Most of the scraps of paper in there were just a reminder of things I had finally gotten over, was finally at peace with. I didn't need a flyer from the incident, reminding me of a hatred I didn't even feel anymore, or that silly little card from

'. Looking at those things that had meant so much to me, I couldn't even think why I would want them.

Was this the 'closure' I'd been waiting so long for? Because it didn't seem over, it didn't seem like the story was over exactly, but maybe I was just finally moving forward, no longer stuck in the past with old wounds I'd left purposely open. Because looking back now at all he'd done, I didn't feel a thing.

Sure, it was still wrong, it still haunted me in the halls behind closed doors and in whispered conversations, but I wasn’t chained down by it anymore, and there was no need to be trapped by this self-imposed prison.

I gathered up all the notes and letters, and anything having to do with Michael, placing them at the top of the box ready to throw away. I would have done it right away if I hadn’t noticed the corner of a slightly wrinkled brown envelope just peaking out from under the bed. It must have been dragged out along with the box.

I pushed my memory box off to the side and reached out for the envelope, feeling my pulse pick up just from having it in my hands. So much rested on this one slip of paper, a few words that could make or break the rest of my life.

Okay, I’m sure it wasn’t as dramatic as all that, surely life would go on if I didn’t get in, but I wanted to. I wanted to

.

Sitting on the edge of the bed I clutched the envelope in my hand, willing myself to open it, but I couldn’t bring myself to break the seal when blissful ignorance was a much safer place to be.

“You planning on opening that?”

My head snapped up abruptly and my body jerked forward, almost landing me on the floor.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I looked up at Wes who was standing in my doorway, an amused smile playing on the corners of his lips, and not looking the slightest bit sorry.

I made a face at him, earning a laugh as I sat down properly, this time not on the very edge of the bed.

He stayed where he was, grinning widely, and I realized he was probably waiting for permission to actually come inside.

“You planning on standing there all day?”

He smirked slightly, pushed off the doorframe and strolled into the room, grabbed the chair from my desk and rolled it right in front of me so that when he sat down our knee’s bumped.

“Better?” He asked with a grin, head cocked slightly to the side.

It felt like the roles were reversed between us, because I swear

would usually be the one blushing, but this time it was all me.

As if I didn’t have it bad before, this new confident, flirty Wes was someone I was had no idea how to deal with.

I wracked my brain for something even semi-intelligent to say, but before I had the chance Wes pulled the envelope out of hands. I couldn’t even catch my breath long enough to protest. Clearly I was reaching an all new level of pathetic.

“University of Aroughs huh? Sweet, we could fly down to the city together.”

“

I got in.”

“The answer’s right here,” He said, waving the envelope in front of me. “What are you waiting for?”

“I’m scared to see what it says.” I blurted out. He raised an eyebrow, as if silently asking if I was serious, and then shrugged when I didn’t supply a better excuse.

“Well then, I guess I’ll have to find out for you.”

“What?”

Before I even fully registered what he’d said he was already ripping open the flap, and I felt myself flipping emotions between excitement and complete panic.

I winced slightly as he pulled the cream colored paper half way out. The sheet looked expensive, no way they would waste expensive paper on a rejection letter right?

I held my breath as his eyes scanned over the words, and desperately tried to read his face for a clue about what the letter said, but his expression stayed completely neutral.

After an agonizing minute he slid the sheet of paper back into the envelope.

“Well?” I asked impatiently.

“Well what?”

“What did it

?” I practically begged.

He shrugged, and started to turn away, still keeping hold of the letter. “I said I’d find out what it says, I didn’t say I’d tell you.”

I grabbed his arm and pulled him back around to face me. “Let me see it then.”

I reached out for the letter, but he held it up out of reach. “I thought you didn’t want to see it.”

“Well I do

.”

“If you can reach it, it’s yours.” He said with a half smile.

I gave him a skeptical look, which I expected him to take as an are-you-kidding-me-here? But clearly that was the wrong message to send, since he only held his hand up higher.

“That’s mean.” I stated with a pout.

“I never said I was nice.”

I tried to reach up to grab it from his hand, knowing it was pointless, but it did give me the opportunity to stand really close to him, and I wasn’t about to pass that up even if it made me look slightly idiotic.

He laughed at my attempts and his arm bobbed up and down from it, causing the envelope to almost come within reach.

Since he didn’t seem to be getting tired of his game I jumped up on the bed before he realized what I was doing and snatched it out of his hand.

“That’s cheating!” He laughed.

I stuck my tongue out and turned my back to him, holding my breath again as I went to pull the cream colored letter from the envelope.

I only got past the salutation before he reached around me, trying to take it back once more.

I whipped around quickly, forgetting I was standing on a bed and lost my footing. Wes kept his arm around my waist, steadying me, and while the situation should have been totally embarrassing I would have been completely comfortable to just stay that way.

The letter fluttered to the floor behind Wes abandoned and he held on for a moment more before turning around to pick it up.

I jumped down off the bed to go stand next to him and saw with a jolt that he was crouched in front of my memory box. My heart dropped down to my feet, nearly further when he straightened back up, face cleared of any of his former amusement.

If he'd looked blank trying to hide what he felt, or even angry, I could have dealt with it, found something to say to fix it, but instead he just looked sad. It wasn't obvious to see, just a slight downturn of his lips, a sudden heaviness to his eyes, and I whispered the worst possible thing you could say in a situation like this.

"I can explain."

Probably one of the worst phrases you can hear right after 'we need to talk', those three words were always full of guilt, they meant admitting to something you'd finally been caught doing. And while this situation was completely different, contrary to my words, I had no idea how to explain it.

He didn't seem to be looking for an explanation though, just held the letter slowly out to me.

“You got in. Congrats.”

I took the letter from his outstretched hand and he walked out the door without another word.

It took a few minutes for me to gather up the courage to walk back down the stairs and join everyone else. Wes smiled slightly when I settled down awkwardly beside him and from across the room I seemed to be getting curious looks from all three of my friends.

But once again, I had no way to explain and felt like a complete coward for not even trying.

Caught up as I was with feeling bad, I still had no idea about what was playing and eventually got up to go to the kitchen. I filled up a glass of water and sat down at the table just staring at it until someone walked in, breaking my thoughts.

I was expecting it to be Grace or Evan, demanding some kind of answer, so I was completely surprised when Amanda leaned against the counter across from me.

We stared at each other in silence for a moment before she sighed quietly.

“He likes you, you know.”

For a second I wondered if my crush was really that obvious, but then I remembered this was Mandy, and for the little while we’d been friends, she’d known me better than anyone.

“No he doesn’t,” I mumbled.

She smiled slightly, shaking her head in disbelief.

“He’s liked you since the tenth grade Ary.”

I was startled by the use of my nickname from her, and then the rest of what she’d said registered.

“How do you know?”

She hesitated for a second, looking incredible guilty and refusing to meet my eyes.

“He told me,” She whispered.

My jaw dropped open, completely at a loss for what to say.

“He

you?” I repeated, hardly believing it.

She looked back at me, and her eyes looked watery as she blinked rapidly.

“Back in tenth grade. He asked me about you and I said… I said you liked Michael. It’s all my fault. I should have told him to go for it but I just had no idea, I had no idea and everything that happened, it was all my fault.” She ended loudly.

“God Mandy, how can you say that? I

like Michael back then, and what happened had nothing to do with you. I that why you stopped talking to me?” I asked, finally voicing what I’d been wondering for three years.

“You don’t understand. I knew him. I

Michael, but I swear the guy I knew was a nice guy. We were best friends, and then we started to grow apart when I met

you.” She said with a smile, repeating the words I’d heard from Michael.

“But then he told me to choose, either I could be friends with him or you. And I told him a real friend wouldn’t make me choose. I didn’t expect to ever talk to him after that, Michael’s a stubborn guy, he doesn’t let things go; I should have known that, I

know that. But you just liked him so much and he seemed to like you too and I selfishly thought that if you two got together we could all be friends again. I was so stupid. Everything he did to you, it was all to get back at me. I didn’t realize he’d liked me until the incident. Sure, there were those posts in the

, but I thought they were just some silly taunt, I never thought he’d try to hurt you just for some petty revenge, but I

have known. It’s really all my fault and I’m so,

sorry Arya. I couldn’t face you after that day knowing what I’d done, I

can’t.” She ended with a hollow sounding laugh.

“I never blamed you Mandy. Michael told me that day you had something to do with it… but I never blamed you.”

“You should though.”

“You know, being wrong about Michael was hard, but loosing my best friend was harder.” I whispered, realizing for the first time how true it was.

“You’ve done alright though,” She said with a smile. “Look at all the good friends you have out there, you never really needed me.”

“I still do actually.”

She laughed suddenly, the first genuine laugh I’d heard from her since the tenth grade, and I had to wonder how often she’d laughed since. Obviously not that often, since she seemed surprised by the action herself.

“You mean all this time I didn’t have to be friends with Paige?”

And with that I burst out laughing too, from relief mostly, that I might actually get my old friend back. It was only after we’d both calmed down that I noticed how quiet it was, and grimaced with the realization that everyone else in the room had probably been standing around the door listening.

Mandy glanced in that direction as well, coming to the same conclusion with a grin, and declared loudly, “well, I guess we should get back to the movie.”

By the time we walked into the room everyone was sitting comfortably, as if they hadn’t moved an inch in all that time. The movie didn’t look far past the point I’d left, but I decided not to question it.

Alone on Cloud 9 (20)

Well here it is, the last chapter, sorry if these last few have seemed a little rushed, I was suddenly determined to finish this for the watty awards, which was maybe the push I needed to actually write the end. Hope the journey's been worth it.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 20

“We need to talk.”

I looked up from the glass I was cleaning into Michael Conner’s liquid silver eyes. To think I used to want him so bad.

He cleared his throat and I realized I hadn’t answered yet.

“I’m busy.” I muttered distractedly.

Wes was here again. He and Evan occupied a table at the far end of the room, and I was dying to go over there, to somehow explain last night. In my mind I was begging him to look up, glance over, anything to indicate he didn’t think I was a completely lost cause. Not that I didn’t deserve it.

After everyone had left I threw out all my Michael Conner memories without the slightest hint of regret. Unfortunately the boy in front of me was not so easily disposed of. He moved into my line of sight, cutting off my view of the café until I was forced to look at him.

I knew he would leave without getting his way, and this time there was no one here to deter him from pestering me until it happened. He raised an eyebrow, almost in challenge, and while I was so over playing his games I threw down my rag with a reluctant sigh.

“Fine, lets get this over with.”

With a gloating smirk he led the way outside, opening the door so I could walk out in front of him. Before leaving I spared one more glance at Wes, but I wish I hadn’t, because right at that second he finally decided to look up, to see me walking out the door with Michael. Bloody perfect.

All of a sudden I was completely annoyed. Intentional or not, Michael always seemed to be screwing things up for me, I’d already lost so much because of him, and honestly he didn’t deserve another second of my time.

But if this is what it took to finally get rid of him, than I’d just get it over with.

“Well?”

“Well, here we are.” He said with a slow smile, completely at ease and ignoring my obvious impatience.

“Yes, and

are we here?”

His smile grew, like every word from his mouth was supposed to be some kind of gift to me. “I told you babe, I

get my way.”

“Fascinating, thanks for sharing, but if that’s all you have to say then I’ll be getting back to work.”

Truthfully, I just didn’t want to spend any more time out here than I had to. I needed to get back in there fast, before Wes or Evan, or anyone for that matter, could make any assumptions as to why I’d just left the building with Michael Conner.

“Arya, wait.” He called out just as I turned to leave, and against my better judgment, I turned around, figuring it was best to just get this over with, finish the story for good, and if this was the last chapter, I was more than ready for it to end.

He expression, for once, looked sincere, no ulterior motive, no smugness, just a simple embarrassed expression that I

would have believed was possible if I wasn’t seeing it with my own two eyes.

“Don’t you think it’s time we stopped messing around?”

“I already have Michael.” I said cautiously.

“Then let me apologize for real.”

The words set me back, even more than the expression had. If I was confused before, I was baffled now, and though I’d always been a bad judge of this, for once I didn’t feel like part of a game, like the audience to his one-man act, and I had no idea where this could be coming from.

“I’m sorry for everything that happened two years ago, I got carried away in a petty grudge, but it went way to far.”

“Well.” I said unsure how to respond. “Um… I’m sorry for what happened two years ago too, but I had nothing to do with it.” I added, not wanting him to think I was taking the blame for the food fight.

“I know.” He said with a wry smile. “That was all Mandy. You know, if I’d actually gotten to know you under different circumstances, I mean, you’re not that bad you know?”

“What are you trying to say?” I asked carefully, unsure why he insisted on bringing up the past.

He let out a deep breath, running his hand through his hair in a quick jerk.

“What I’m saying is… I think… I like you.”

And there it was, the three words I'd waited so long to hear, and they didn't mean a thing. I should have been happy to hear it, if for no other reason than to rub it in his face, but for once, I didn’t see him as Michael Conner, the complete jerk who broke my heart, I just saw him as another guy putting himself out there for a girl, and I didn’t have it in me to be mean about it.

"Maybe you do Michael, but I don't. I whispered back gently.

"That's not true, you love me,” He stated, suddenly so self assured, so completely confident in his words he didn't doubt them for a second. If I'd admired it once I couldn't see why. It had been the problem all along. I'd liked him too much and he'd known it, never doubted for a second, and now acted like nothing had changed.

"You're wrong," I said simply.

"Say it then, say you don't love me. You can't can you?"

If I'd cared at all I might have been angry, annoyed at least by the slight upturn of his lips, barely suppressing a smile, as if the idea of my being over him were absolutely ridiculous.

"I don't love you Michael." I said quietly.

His face crinkled slightly with confusion, as if he'd lost the script.

"But… no… you don't mean that… it's

"

"That's just it Michael, I was never in love with

, just this idea I had of you… but you're not that guy, not the guy I thought you were, or wanted so badly for you to be, and I've finally figured that out."

"I am that guy." He insisted.

I heard it again, just the slightest hint of genuine emotion, and I couldn't believe this was actually happening, that Michael Conner liked me.

It would be so easy to give in. To forget everything that had happened, to finally get the guy I always thought I wanted. Except that guy was Wes, and

was inside, so I had to wonder what the hell I was still doing out here.

"I'm tired of this game Michael, I'm done playing, and I’m finally over you. I can’t go back to the way I used to feel, things have changed, and there’s no going back now." I said gently.

For a moment hurt flashed across his eyes, and maybe, just maybe he felt what he'd done to me so many times before, but it was far too late. Two years too late.

"Arya…"

“Look Michael, I have to go.”

I turned away, and I knew this was finally it, the ever elusive closure I'd been waiting for all along. I was walking away from it all; all the drama, revenge and lies, but all the good times too, rare though they were.

It reminded me of all those could-be favorite books, the ones that were great just until the last chapter and then had a sad, or unsatisfactory ending. Maybe it wasn't always about the happy ending, maybe it's just about the story. I didn't have to be the heroine in some tragic love story, and I might not be the princess who lived happily ever after, but I was starting to think that was okay.

I walked back into Moonbeams feeling like a huge weight had been lifted, but the god feeling didn’t last long, because the first thing I noticed was the Wes was gone, and Evan was staring right at me looking completely defeated.

I desperately wanted to walk over there and ask where Wes had gone, and what could possibly have made Evan Larkin lose his smile, because that was definitely a cause for concern, but of course my boss was standing behind the counter, giving me the get-your-butt-back-here-this-instant

look, and by the time there was a break in the crowd, Evan was gone too.

***

I stood in front of his house, wondering if I was still allowed to show up whenever I wanted. By the look he gave me at the café, I had a feeling Evan might not be too thrilled to see me, but it was time to stop running away and going after what I wanted.

So before I could talk myself out of it, I was walking up to the door, ringing the bell, and then it was too late to change my mind.

Like I'd hoped Evan was the one to answer the door. He looked surprised for a moment, and part of me was afraid he would just close the door in my face, but with a resigned sigh he moved out of the doorway, waving me in.

We stood there by the door facing each other, no one saying anything until Evan finally broke the silence.

"I thought you said there was nothing with you and Michael." He said quietly.

"I wasn't lying Evan, there isn't."

"But Wes said—"

"I thought Wes didn't gossip." I said defensively.

Evan grimaced but didn't make any excuses for his friend. "He saw your box of stuff from Michael."

"No one ever lets me explain." I said ruefully. "Yeah, I kept all that stuff, but the reason he saw it was because I'd taken

it all out to throw away.”

For a second Evan looked relieved, but in another moment his expression changed to confusion.

“Then why did you leave Moonbeams with him today?”

“He wanted to talk to me. I didn’t see any harm in it.”

“And what happened?”

I sighed loudly, not wanting to admit this, but I figured I owed him the truth, and hearing it from me was better than any rumors that might start.

“He said he liked me.”

Like I expected, Evan’s jaw dropped.

“I told him I didn’t feel the same way.”

Evan’s face paled, and he swore quietly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wes heard.”

“What?”

“He heard. He must have. He went out after you and came back a minute later looking devastated. He didn’t even say a word to me, just grabbed his stuff and left, he must have heard.”

“He

walk in on just that part,” I mumbled.

He mouth turned up into a slow grin. “So does that mean you like him back?”

I felt myself blushing slightly and heard Evan laugh.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t know, I know you were all listening at the door at my house yesterday.”

He shrugged, not even trying to deny it. “We didn’t hear that part, or Wes wouldn’t have been nearly so upset today.”

I punched him in the arm hard. “Ow, what was that for?”

“If you knew he liked me why didn’t you say anything!”

“I was waiting until you were completely over Michael.”

“I told you I was.”

“Yes, but I don’t think

were really sure until you turned him down.”

I glared at him and then shook my head, thinking maybe he was right. Now there was no doubt about my being over Michael, now I’d had a chance and refused it.

“Listen, don’t tell him okay? I want to do it myself… if it’s not to late that is.”

“Trust me, it isn’t.”

When I finally left, I felt hopeful for the first time in years. It was risky and scary, and in a few weeks we would all be graduating anyway, but if we only had a few weeks, even a day, it was worth the risk. This time, for him, it was definitely worth the risk.

Despite my determined thoughts though, I couldn’t seem to talk to him all week. Every time I saw him in the halls he’d disappear, and even when I went out of my way to walk past his class, he’d already be gone, clearly avoiding me.

And before I knew it, a whole week had gone by and it was the weekend again, Saturday morning on the day of commencement and Mandy and Grace had somehow ended up at my house getting ready.

Sure, there were still exams to get through, and I was paying for my procrastination with several late nights and as many nights off work as I could get, and classes weren’t officially over yet, but it still felt like the end of the year, the last chance, and no matter what happened, I was determined to talk to him today.

We headed to the school in the late afternoon, our grad dresses tucked under our cerulean blue grad gowns, and as we got closer, I could help but be excited.

Arriving at Westover High there was nothing but a see of blue cloaks and caps, with the occasional parent wondering around in formal clothes looking for their kid.

My parents, who’d dropped us off, each gave me a hug, a rare show of affection, and walked towards the back of the school where a pavilion had been set up for the ceremony.

We spent some time taking pictures in the warm afternoon air and then I broke away to make a bathroom run and make sure my makeup still looked okay. If I was going to go embarrass myself in front of Wes I wanted to at least look good doing it.

I walked down the hall through the crowd of students, heading toward my locker and stopped where I stood and

the end of the hall. Standing by my locker, a rose in his hand, was a blushing Wes.

And he was talking to Grace.

I didn’t really understand what I was seeing, but when he handed the flower to her, the message was loud and clear.

I felt tears immediately blurring my vision, all confidence gone, before I turned on my heel and walked away, blinking rapidly to clear my eyes. There was no way I was crying, no way I was letting another rumor start at the end of school, that was

the legacy I wanted to leave behind. No way. I kept walking until I felt like I could see again and found myself heading towards Paige and Mandy. Great.

Mandy smiled as I walked closer, and I returned it, earning a questioning glance from Paige.

“Come on Amanda, lets get out of here.”

“Actually Paige, I think I’m going to talk to Ary for a while.”

Paige’s jaw dropped, as if she wasn’t used to being defied. “Are you serious?”

Paige looked between us, her expression suddenly changing from annoyed to furious. “Fine. Just fine. I never liked you much anyway.”

“Classy Paige.” I said sarcastically.

“Whatever, you guys were always a bunch of losers, you couldn’t get a guy,” She said glaring at me, “and you lost yours to someone else.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jeremy.” She said with a smirk.

Mandy looked confused, and I’m sure my expression matched hers, but after a moment her eyes widened in realization.

“Are you saying

had something to do with his breaking up with me?”

“Let’s just say when boy’s cant get what they need, they get it from somewhere else.”

“No way.” She breathed, eyes suddenly popping even wider.

“What?” I asked.

“Jeremy. That’s who Paige cheated on Wes with.”

Paige looked surprised, as if she hadn’t expected us to come to that conclusion. All this time I thought Mandy had known, but clearly this was news to her too.

Paige looked between us with a smirk, not even ashamed at screwing her supposed best friends boyfriend, and cheating on her own. I wanted to slap the smirk right off her face, but as if anticipating it, Mandy grabbed my hand.

“Don’t, it’s not even worth it.”

With one last glare at the two of us Paige sauntered off and Mandy let out a breath. “What a bitch.”

We parted ways and before I knew it, the hallways were empty. I knew most everyone was either gathered in the

cafeteria, lined up alphabetically or filing into the empty seats in the pavilion outside. I was glad for the quiet.

After all this time, all these years it was happening. I was graduating, leaving the ghosts of my past behind.

I opened my locker and looked over the few keepsakes that were stuck to the inside of the door. A birthday card from Grace, a picture of me an Mandy, worn out at the edges and half hidden behind the valentine cutout from Evan two years ago. At the bottom, a poem cut out from the school newspaper. I ran my hands over all the memories, the one's I'd chosen to keep.

With a last breath I went to close my locker, and then noticed the red rose sitting at the very top of a pile of books.

It couldn’t be.

I pulled it our hesitantly, wondering if I was just imagining things. A small card hung from a gold ribbon around the stem and I opened it with shaking hands.

I rushed down the hall, not an easy thing to do in the three-inch heels I’d chosen to wear, but I had to do this now, no more waiting.

Outside the doors to the cafeteria I saw Evan, and with a single glance at the rose in my hands he smiled and pointed towards a door nearby.

I felt like I could hear my heart beating out of my chest, the sound even louder than my heels click-clacking against the floor. It was that completely cliché sweaty palms, butterflies in the stomach feeling I never thought I’d let myself feel again.

And then I pushed open the door. He looked up in surprise, and registered the rose immediately, his face quickly turning the same color.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

We stood awkwardly facing each other, whatever confidence I’d had walking in having disappeared, but I knew this was my move to make.

I wanted to say the perfect thing, but I didn’t have the words, and then I realized Wes had summed it up exactly.

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So I pointed to the card dangling from the stem.

“It’s always been you too,” I whispered.

He looked surprised for a second, but I saw the doubt that followed.

“What about Michael?”

“He’s got nothing on you.”

He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief, and I walked the last few steps between us.

“It’s about time you figured that out.” He said jokingly.

“Sorry it took so long.” And I leaned up and kissed him.

In the books and movies this was the end, the happily ever after, but in reality I didn't know where I'd be tomorrow or two years from now, who I'd be with or how I'd get there. In

reality there was no set ending, all that was guaranteed was that I could chose any road I wanted, and right now, this was everything I wanted, and

had endless potential.